



// Hesitating when dealing with employees who aren't pulling their weight can be extremely harmful to your organization.

THE
front

Ready, Aim ... *Hesitate*

Corporate cultures that tolerate mediocrity often do because they don't act quickly enough.

— By Roza Rojdev and Dennis C. Laphan

There's a bit of a mystery that plays out every day in virtually every organization no matter the size, the industry or the profit structure. There are, at every level, employees that are commonly observed by their peers and even their subordinates to be incompetent. This is not a judgment hastily made, but one formed from observation, interaction and a rational assessment of the individuals. The mystery is not why these employees are incompetent, but rather how is it that they continue to remain in their positions, or worse yet, get promoted.

Either of two distinct, but equally powerful, avenues can lead to the situation described above. Performance apathy is the first avenue; it is the existence of an organizational culture that tolerates mediocrity and fails to adequately define performance standards. This avenue is usually insidious and aspires to spread itself throughout the organization that suffers from it. Typically, such an afflicted organization can be recognized by its symptoms of significant performance issues across many measures.

The second avenue, which can be characterized as “ready, aim... hesitate,” is not

a cultural malady, but rather a managerial failure on a personal and individual level. Although it is less insidious than the culturally-based avenue, this managerial flaw nonetheless has the potential to be just as destructive to the organization and may become entrenched as an alternate form of organizational dysfunction.

“WHEN UNSUITABLE EMPLOYEES ARE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE IN THEIR POSITIONS, THERE ARE NO [HEROES].”

Every good murder mystery will have a hapless victim and a readily identifiable hero. Not so in this case.

When unsuitable employees are allowed to continue in their positions, there are no heroic protagonists, but there are scores of victims. These victims include not only the incompetent employee, but also include many of their peers and subordinates.

Banking on Failure

What's the big deal, you might ask, about having an employee on board whose performance is substandard when you have scores of others more than capable of compensating for the underperformance? Would you feel the same way if it was a bank and you had just one employee who failed to remain honest? Leave the underperformer in place and you demonstrate unwittingly to the rest of the team that a lower standard of performance is perfectly acceptable.

Colleagues don't usually mind helping another colleague get up to speed – but only to a point, after which their generosity turns to resentment as they become responsible for someone else's monkey. Even for those with the most generous natures, eventually the situation gets the best of them. Not only do they have to carry the extra workload, but they must also pretend that the underperforming colleague is actually their equal. They sense the dishonesty and unfairness, which ultimately leads them to react. Over time, resentment settles in and reluctance to work side-by-side starts to emerge. Collaboration and teamwork suffer, and fragmentation of alignment on even small issues begins to emerge.

The situation is even worse when you have a team of high-performers and a manager who fails to eliminate the incompetent. In the eyes of the performers, the delinquent manager defaults on his own responsibility to execute and earns the status of underperformer as well. The manager loses credibility and the respect of his staff. A pivotal point is reached where a decision is made by the performers – they will either lower their performance to accommodate the lowest

performer or, as is typically the case with high-performers, they will seek employment elsewhere. Either way, a new lower-performance standard is set for the department. In the worst-case scenario, the manager's inability to demote, transfer or terminate underperformers evolves into accepted, collective behavior, and ultimately it becomes entrenched in the culture as a form of performance apathy.

Why They Fail

Managing performance is about managing the talents of people and helping them reach progressively tougher standards of excellence. It is not a discrete activity that only occurs at six-month intervals in time for a raise or bonus. Managing people is a daily activity that can be neither subrogated nor delegated. It is far from an easy task, yet few organizations provide their managers, supervisors and executives with any substantive training. To the contrary, it is the general rule that we select and promote managers based on their functional or technical skill sets and their past performances. It is indeed a rare discussion in which a candidate has come under any real scrutiny for her abilities to effectively manage people's performance.

There are two interesting yet polar situations that might serve well to illustrate the peculiar dynamics that result in a state of "ready, aim... hesitate" when it comes to eliminating undesirable employees. In the first situation, you have a thoroughly likeable, hard-working, loyal employee who has just one flaw – he cannot deliver the results. Because he is so affable, he has been promoted to a role beyond his talents and abilities. As his manager, you clearly see the disparity be-

tween his work and his peers' performance. Intellectually, you know that intervention is mandated, and in your mind, you are easily able to tick off the reasons for such action. But, then comes the moment of hesitation – you allow yourself to hypothesize that the affable, loyal, well-intentioned employee will affect a miraculous turnaround, and you can therefore postpone the unsavory task of terminating him.

In the second situation, you have an employee who is routinely a star performer, outdistancing most of her peers in productivity, and one on whom you rely when you are in a numbers crunch. This all star employee has a single defect that makes her an underperformer – she is intolerant of ordinary performance in her subordinates, peers and even superiors. As her manager, you are made aware, almost on a daily basis, of how this defect affects others at all levels in the organization. It is clear to you that your star performer is negatively impacting the morale and the productivity of the organization and, perhaps, even your career. Intellectually, you know that intervention is mandated, and in your mind, you are easily able to tick off the reasons for such action. But, then comes the moment of hesitation – how will I make up the loss, and who will I go to when I am in a crunch? However difficult managing underperformance might seem, it is trivial compared to the consequences if the situation is disregarded. By not helping underperformers find a position or a team that fits them, the manager instead condemns them to a career that may include pretense, deception, lack of respect and missed opportunities for them to understand and develop their true abilities.

Non-Stop Reviews

Fast, efficient intervention is the only acceptable answer to underperformance. A manager who takes swift action to develop, transfer, demote or terminate a poor performer sets a good example, earns everyone's respect, and builds a department where people are excited, focused and engaged. What actions prepare a manager to act so definitively to eliminate underperformers?

Make expectations for performance clear, simple and relevant. People need to know how their performance will be evaluated and they need to know how well they are doing against that standard.

Make performance reviews a daily event. Provide feedback on an immediate basis instead of waiting for the next six-month window. No employee should be surprised by any formal performance review; the performance review should be merely a written summary acknowledgment of the daily feedback.

Invest the time necessary to make the company's mission and vision clear, simple and relevant to your employees. Be consistent in maintaining this message at all times. Additionally, invest in building a culture of intellectual and emotional maturity where people take responsibility for their own learning and development. And most importantly, if you are earnest in seeking improved performance, start with the end in mind. Get ready, aim and don't hesitate. •mt

Dr. Roza Rojdev is a leadership consultant, educator and speaker. **Dennis Laphan** is an executive, inventor and business consultant. For more information, e-mail roza.rojdev@executivemetrix.com or dennis.laphan@executivemetrix.com, or call 513-379-9793.