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EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMMUNICATION

Imagine you are a second line supervisor sitting in an exit interview with a valued employee, whom we will call Jim. When you ask why he is resigning, Jim tells you he is leaving because the organization has not addressed the poor performance of a problem employee (whom we will call Bill). He believes the organization fails to hold managers accountable for poor performers, and he feels undervalued as a result. Jim appears to address two issues critical to the success of any organization: communication and accountability.

Most modern business magazines and leadership publications emphasize communication and accountability as key elements of good leadership, successful organizations, and happy employees. Technology has provided us with multiple methods of communication; from video teleconferences to email to webinars to text messaging and Blackberries, there are more than enough tools that promise to bring us closer together. However, these means of communication should not be confused with the action of communicating, especially to employees, whose periodic evaluations and exit surveys indicate that they are looking for meaningful discussions in face-to-face settings that provide relevant feedback on performance. Moreover, the act of communication should not be confused with the message being conveyed; in other words, the amount and type of communication between an employer and employee may be completely ineffective if the quality of that interaction is lacking.

Effective communication of goals, expectations, successes and failures are fundamental tenets of accountability, which according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary is "an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions." Rarely can accountability

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¹ RoperASW and TANDBERG International Survey Results Overview. Online. November 2003 http://www.ivci.com/pdf/whitepaper_business_communications_and_meetings_survey.pdf

occur without effective communication.² This article argues that communication and accountability are critical to effective management within any organization. It also focuses on how poor communication regarding accountability and performance issues can negatively impact an organization and corrosive it can be on institutional accountability. Finally, it provides recommendations for how to improve communication at the individual and organizational levels to mitigate these negative impacts and to positively impact the overall culture of an organization by facilitating transparency.

COMMUNICATION

Organizations communicate information using a variety of methods, including information memos, standard operating procedures and processes, performance evaluations, and group meetings. Most meetings, however, are merely information transactions because they are typically used to pass information regarding follow-on meetings, deadlines, and directives. This type of information is critical to an organization's success because it tells the workforce what needs to be accomplished. This paper describes why the direct communication that occurs between an employee and his or her supervisor is just as important as these transactional meetings.

Job descriptions, supervisor expectations, and performance reviews all tell us how employees are measured and held accountable for their performance. This type of information must be consistently conveyed in a way that leaves little ambiguity. Employers cannot simply expect employees to succeed if there is never a clear definition of what success looks like, how it can be achieved, and what the consequences of failure include. Organizations and individual supervisors must reward high performers and, conversely, penalize poor performers when needed. While privacy issues must be considered when addressing poor performance, all employees in an organization should know is that subpar work will not be accepted, and standardized and formal steps will be taken to ensure employees are held accountable for poor performance. If poor performance is not handled appropriately, it can have a terrible effect on

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² accountability." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2010.Merriam-Webster Online. 20 April 2010 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accountability

the overall morale of the workforce. When supervisors do not hold employees accountable for their behavior, good performers feel de-valued, which can lead to decreased quality and quantity of work, a loss of faith in the organization and supervisor, and the potential loss high-performing employees.

Frequent face-to-face meetings are usually the most desired and the most effective method of communication for providing feedback and guidance to an employee regarding his or her performance. It is not enough simply to hand employees binders full of policy and procedure documents, assign tasks and deadlines, and expect them to then be successful; rather, supervisors must ensure employees truly understands their job requirements, have the tools and training needed to successfully complete their tasks, and know what the expectations are for optimal performance.

Let's revisit our examples of the poor performer (Bill) and the valued employee (Jim). Consider how a perceived lack of consequences and accountability may have led to Jim's choice to resign, and the role communication must have played in that situation. What communication problems likely precipitated this situation? Bill's lack of accountability indicates that he was either not familiar with the organization's expectations for performance, or that his direct line supervisor did not provide meaningful direction, feedback, or guidance. His inadequate performance also negatively impacted the organization because a valued employee resigned and the workload for other employees increased for other employees who were picking up Bill's workload.

It is difficult to argue against the assertion that poor performers lead to poor morale. While it may appear this type of issue is local or specific to our own organizations, research shows that it is endemic across industry and government. Craig Lewis notes "Of all the non-actions likely to negatively impact on a team's morale, it seems none is quite so damning as a failure to respond promptly to a team member's poor performance." Lewis follows up by saying "It is a truth that leaders – both good and bad – have a tendency to react too slowly to incompetent performance, choosing instead to let matters run on too long in the hope they will

resolve themselves."³ By effectively communicating performance expectations and following up regularly (for example, not waiting until the employee's annual review to provide feedback, guidance, and input) organizations should be able to improve employee performance and achieve higher morale throughout the organization as a result.

ACCOUNTABILITY

If expected to maintain accountability for their performance, employees need to have a solid understanding of what is expected of them from their very first day of employment. At a minimum, organizations must provide written policies for workforce and career development, specific job requirements, organizational regulations governing promotion and advancement, and clear expectations for employee performance and behavior. These are just the first steps organizations and supervisors should take to promote accountability among the workforce. Following up with guidance and feedback, rewarding outstanding work, establishing minimum standards for performance, and penalizing subpar performers are also needed to sustain and promote accountability in the workforce.

When employees arrive for the first day on the job, they should not only be given guidance regarding timekeeping, parking, office space, and so on, but they should also be provided information specific to their job and career trajectory. This type of information should include a road map for success for their field, specific tasks they are expected to accomplish during the first year, and an outline of required training and education (or demonstrable equivalent competencies). Only after this information is provided to and understood by the new employee can the employee be held accountable for the execution of their duties.

It is important to understand that accountability does not begin and end with job descriptions and performance reviews. It should not be assumed that employees always know what is expected of them or that they have the skills necessary to complete a task or project. While supervisors should recognize that employees generally do not want to be micromanaged, providing frequent feedback is critical to their overall success. Leaders are

³ A Small Hole Can Sink A Big Ship - The Poor Performer and Other Like Obstacles Craig Lewis. http://www.evancarmichael.com/Business-Coach/2688/A-Small-Hole-Can-Sink-A-Big-Ship--The-Poor-Performer-and-Other-Like-Obstacles.html

responsible for group performance. Often, one or more employees on a team may not be successful performers, and some may even be toxic to team relationships. Leaders need to confront these team members, and be prepared for these encounters to be difficult or delicate in nature.

Supervisors have a substantial impact on productivity and morale, though they are seldom recognized or treated that way; some may not even receive effective supervisory training. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for supervisors to be promoted to leadership positions with little to no training to prepare them for success in their new position. Other than mandatory training, it appears as though most organizations spend less of their training budget on supervisors. It is unclear whether this phenomenon is the fault of the individual supervisor or the overall organization. How do you train a new supervisor/leader to be a boss? Is it up to the organization to set the training? Or is it up to the individual to learn how to succeed in that new role? Though much information is readily available to help shape and inform supervisors, it often fails to provide details on how to become a truly great leader, and this is where organizations seem to suffer. This should be a dual responsibility; organizations need to invest and ensure proper training for those who are considered leaders, and individuals also need to take the initiative to pursue effective leadership opportunities', including seeking out other good leaders to figure out what makes them effective. An employee who truly desires to emerge as an exemplary supervisor should identify role models of good leadership and follow that lead. Great leaders aren't great because of what they do, and they weren't necessarily born to be great leaders. Great leaders must seek out and learn what to do to garner the respect and results they desire.

Finally, another way of looking at this situation is to consider the perspective of Jim, the departing employee, who stated that he resigned because the organization did not "deal with" Bill and his poor performance. It is easy to imagine how de-motivating it would be to work alongside a poor performer who, seemingly, suffers few negative consequences. What role did organizational communication play in this perception? Why did the employee think the poor performer was not being held accountable? It is entirely possible that Bill was on probation or had been put on a performance improvement plan; however, given protected personal

information concerns, his co-workers may be unaware that this has transpired. Perception is reality, and if the workforce feels poor performers are not held accountable, then the potential for low morale or widespread distrust of management exists. It is apparent that Jim assumed the organization had not held the problem employee accountable. This type of disconnect is a clear (and common) communication problem. Organizations must make known to all employees what the consequences are for poor performance and what steps will be taken to address poor performers⁴. It is imperative that organizations regularly inform their workforce as to what performance expectations are. Conversely, organizations must provide regular experiential learning or training evolutions for managers and leaders regarding the appropriate handling of poorly performing employees. Finally, it is critical to note that poor performers who refuse to change or improve measurably will be held accountable, regardless of their position within the organization.

Individual poor performers can prove deeply infectious to a larger group, bringing down both the morale of other personnel and that of the organization as a whole. This performance must be dealt with properly and immediately. Employees do not want to work with people who are unable and unwilling to correct repeated mistakes.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SUPERVISORS

ACCOUNTABILITY:

- Set expectations from Day 1
- Revisit expectations early and often
- Give relevant feedback, address strengths and weaknesses
- Provide guidance for improvement in face-to-face meetings and in writing
- Provide resources to enable/encourage success (training and education, remediation of tasks, etc)
- Define punitive actions/rewards for performance

⁴ Resource Center for Addressing and Resolving Poor Performance. U.S Office of Personnel Management. http://www.opm.gov/er/poor/rc_overview.asp

COMMUNICATION

Oral

- Meet with new employees on their first day of employment
- Within the first week of employment, meet again with the new employee to review every aspect of his or her job and performance expectations and review organizational policies regarding outstanding performance and poor performance
- Frequently ask the new employees for feedback or comments on how they feel they are performing

Written

- Welcome aboard package
- o Roadmaps for each series/grade-band
- o Awards manual
- Disciplinary rules and regulations
- o Assign achievable goals for the first 30-60-90 days, etc
- Within first 30 days (and then again at the 90-day mark) schedule a formal review
- If consistent feedback to address poor performance is not having the desired effect, write Memorandums for the Record to document poor performance
- Olf necessary, place poor performers on a Performance Improvement Plan Communication and accountability are keys to a successful organization. If supervisors follow the steps outlined above, they will set the conditions for their employees to be successful, will foster a workplace environment that promotes communication and collaboration, and achieve transparency in the methods used to hold employees accountable for their performance.