



As a logistics manager, have you ever found yourself frustrated in dealing with difficult or problem employees? Do they seem to lack what it takes to do the job? Do they simply not measure up to the task?

Dealing with a problem employee—one whose job performance does not meet work expectations and requirements—often is viewed as one of the most unpleasant and formidable management tasks. But it need not be intimidating, says human resources consultant James F. Heaney of Heaney and Burns Associates Consulting Services in Washington, D.C. The key, Heaney says, is to adopt a methodical strategy for dealing with employees who fail to perform on the job. “Most people,” he notes, “face employee problems without a systematic approach.”

To analyze and resolve employee-performance problems, Heaney advocates a six-step method. At each juncture in the analysis, the manager has to ask himself a question (see the list of questions on Page 55). Evaluation of each question forces the manager to determine the root cause of poor performance. These causes may include unclear objectives, deficient skills, insufficient resources, outside influences, insufficient motivation, and finally, an individual unsuited for the task at hand. Once he has identified the cause, the manager then can develop a corrective-action plan.

Great Expectations

To determine the cause of poor employee performance, the first question a manager must ask is this: Does the employee know what is expected? Often, the first step toward

Six ways to cure worker woes

Here's a tested method of analyzing employee problems and improving job performance.

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solving any performance problem is simply communicating to the employee what is expected of him or her. As a supervisor, the manager is 100-percent accountable for communicating job expectations.

Before any such communication can take place, however, managers must know themselves what they want, need, or require from their employees. “Oftentimes, the manager has never sat down to state clearly in measurable terms what he wants, needs, or expects from someone,” says Heaney.

Once the manager has defined the job requirements and expectations, those objectives must be communicated to the employee—along with their rationale. When the manager takes the time to explain the reasons for those objectives, Heaney contends, they are more easily understood and acted upon.

The consultant also urges top managers to make sure that subordinates “buy into” job expectations. These expectations are more apt to be met, he explains, when they are set jointly by the manager and the subordinate. This is particularly true when an executive must deal with a supervisory problem that’s in the domain of a subordinate manager.

The Right Stuff

If the employee understands the job requirements but a problem still exists, the manager then should ask himself the next question in the analysis: Does the worker have the skills necessary to do what is expected? If the manager decides that the answer is no, he must arrange for some kind of training.

But how do you determine if a person has the right job skills? The

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first way is through direct observation. To do this, the manager must watch how the employee performs the required task. Obviously, this approach is more suited to measuring the skills of dock workers or forklift-truck drivers than other supervisory managers or professional personnel. In the case of the latter employees, the executive should instead ask the subordinate manager or professional to explain how he or she would go about achieving the expected objective, Heaney says.

If the manager decides that the employee indeed lacks the necessary skills, he should create a simple but effective training program. For this, Heaney suggests using "results-based accountable training," a method that's used in the U.S. Air Force. Under this procedure, the manager sets specific tasks to be mastered and obtains written acknowledgments from both trainer and trainee that the requisite skills have been taught and learned. After the training has been completed, the manager too signs a paper stating that the employee has reached an adequate skill level and places it in the employee's file for future reference. This ensures that an employee can't come back later and state that no one told him how to do the job.

If, on the other hand, the employee clearly understands the job and has the skills, then the manager has to ask himself the next question: Does the employee have the resources to do the job? If not, the manager must either provide them or revise the job expectations to match the level of resources.

In evaluating resources, the manager must consider whether the following are available to the employee: time, budget, authority, information systems, control systems, manpower, materials, work methods, machines or equipment, management support, and a source of help. If a new job expectation has been placed on the employee, then the manager must ask himself what changes may be necessary to meet this new need. It may be necessary, for example, to drop a project or otherwise adjust expectations.

Professional Help

Sometimes, the employee meets the first three criteria for performing on the job and yet a problem still

exists. In that case, the manager then must consider the influence of outside forces. There are two kinds of outside forces: business and social. An outside business force could result from a variety of causes, such as a union labor contract, peer-group pressure, or conflicting directions from two bosses. Social forces come from outside the workplace. The employee, for example, could be having personal problems resulting from drugs, alcohol, money, romance, health, or a family situation.

Whatever the problem's cause, the manager should recognize the forces behind it and assist the employee, mitigating those forces if possible and adjusting job expectations if necessary. If it's a personal problem, however, under no circumstances should the manager attempt to intervene. "The worst thing managers can do is try to play psychologist," says Heaney. "They are not qualified and they can get sued."

To illustrate the deleterious consequences of interfering in an employee's personal problem, the con-

sultant tells the following story. A manager noticed that his secretary always arrived to work on Monday mornings in rough shape. At first, the manager thought the woman had a drinking problem. But when he inquired, she told him that it was her husband who drank. Indeed, her drunken husband beat her, the secretary explained. The manager responded that if he were the woman, he would "divorce the schmuck." On the basis of that remark, Heaney says, the manager and company were sued for making divorce a condition of employment.

Instead of trying to solve an employee's personal problem, the manager should encourage that individual to seek professional counseling. In fact, if an employee cites an at-home problem as an excuse for poor work performance, the first thing a manager should do is ask if the individual is seeking assistance and recommend that he do so if he is not. If the individual does obtain counseling for a personal problem but his work performance does not im-

Six Questions to Ask

When Assessing Performance Problems

What follows is consultant James F. Heaney's six-step method to analyzing and resolving employee-performance problems. To get at the root cause of the problem, the manager must ask himself the following questions in the sequence indicated. If the answer to any question is negative, he must first resolve that situation before progressing to another level. Heaney's recommended solutions are included with each question.

1) Does the employee know what is expected?

Solution: Communicate what you want, need, or expect to the employee in specific terms.

2) Does the employee have the skills necessary to do what is expected?

Solution: Set up a training program that verifies that the skills have been mastered.

3) Does the employee have the re-

sources necessary to accomplish what is expected?

Solution: Provide the needed resources or change your expectations to realistically match the level of resources.

4) Has the employee encountered outside forces that are affecting his or her ability to meet the expectations?

Solution: Recognize the forces and assist the employee in mitigating them if possible, or adjust expectations if necessary.

5) Is there sufficient motivation for the employee to do the performance/behavior that is expected?

Solution: Construct the situation and consequences to encourage the expected behavior.

6) Can the employee just not perform as you want, need, or expect?

Solution: Reassignment, change in expectations to match employee's capabilities, or termination.

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prove, however, the manager moves on to the next two steps in the systematic evaluation.

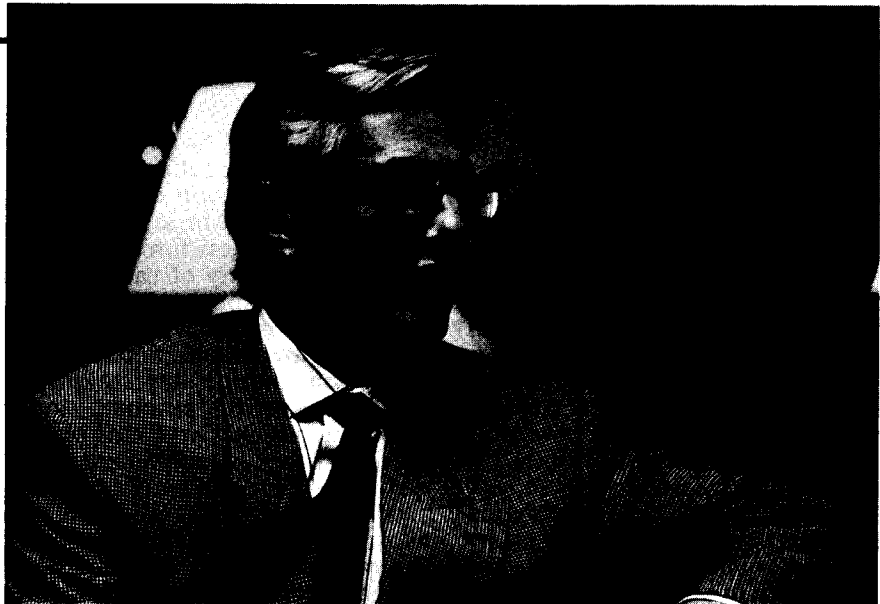
Carrots and Sticks

Assessing the employee's motivation is the fifth step in the systematic approach. The key question here is: Assuming that the employee has the knowledge, skills, and resources to do the job without being hindered by outside forces, is that individual sufficiently motivated to perform on the job as expected? If the answer is no, the manager must "construct"—or restructure—the situation and consequences to encourage the expected behavior.

In assessing a motivational problem, the manager should try to view the consequences of the poor behavior from the employee's point of view. One way to do this, Heaney suggests, is to draw a T on a piece of paper. Under one arm of the T, the manager should list the rewards of a certain behavior from the employee's point of view and under the other, the negative consequences. "When you lay out the problem," Heaney observes, "you always find that there are not a lot of negative consequences."

As an example, he cites a case in which a warehouse manager found that his workers were not removing damaged goods from the work area in the course of their job. Because they were being judged on their ability to fill orders, the workers saw no advantage to removing damaged items while picking goods; they would simply push the damaged items in a bin aside and continue loading their pallet jacks to meet the work quota. To get his employees to keep the warehouse clean, the manager decided to take all the workers off the clock for a designated time period and have them perform a "damage sweep."

To be effective, negative consequences for poor performance must be personal, immediate, and certain. "When people face a situation," Heaney explains, "they look at something called a table of consequences and ask what's in it for them." For that reason, rewards and reinforcement are more effective than punishment in motivating individuals to perform. "The problem with using carrots and sticks," says the consultant, "is that once re-



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moved, the behavior returns to where it was."

In fact, the best way for a manager to deal with someone with a motivation problem is to explain how good work performance benefits the individual. To do this, a manager has to know why that person wants the job. Knowledge of a worker's needs and desires allows a manager to provide reinforcement when an employee's enthusiasm starts to flag. A way to gain this knowledge is for the manager to ask an employee when hired why he wants the job. If the employee says money, then the manager should ask what he wants it for. If the employee says he wants a Camaro, for instance, the manager can remind the employee of his desire for the car when the employee's motivation starts to falter and affect his job performance.

The Last Resort

What if a manager has tried all five steps outlined above to improve performance but still finds that the employee fails to meet job expectations? In that case, he has to ask whether the employee is right for the job. If the person cannot perform as wanted, needed, or expected, then either the job expectations must be scaled down to match the employee's capabilities or the individual must be reassigned or terminated.

Although firing someone is difficult, Heaney notes that "termination can be liberation" for both the manager and the individual involved. "If a guy is in the wrong

place," he says, "you're not doing him any favor keeping him there."

Whether the decision is made to terminate a person, reassign him, or revise the job description, Heaney urges a manager to act quickly once he concludes that an individual can't perform as expected. Importantly, the manager should document all steps that have been taken to analyze the performance and correct the problem before any termination or reassignment is made.

In fact, documentation is crucial at every juncture in this evaluation process. From the first, when the problem is defined and the cause analyzed, the manager must create a plan for confronting the employee about it. Once prepared, the manager should hold a formal coaching or counseling session with the employee. During that session, the two should develop a written plan of action to resolve the problem. Finally, the manager should officially follow up on the plan to ensure that the problem is resolved and if not, administer the consequences.

During this whole process to correct poor performance, however, the manager should always project the message that he wants the employee to succeed. Says Heaney, "Successful managers always have two things in mind: getting the results they are paid for and being viewed by the people who work for them as helpful. In order to get people to be committed to you as opposed to cooperative, they have to believe that you as a manager are there for their success." **TM**