

Anne Offner, Ph.D.

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This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link: <http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>

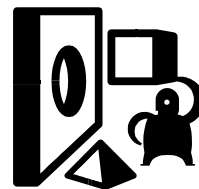
October marks the beginning of the fourth quarter for many organizations. This means that managers and Human Resource professionals will begin thinking about performance appraisal, measuring year-end goals, and rating employees' overall performance for the year.

While the ultimate focus is on achieving goals, overall performance is really the result of an employee's efforts to change. In the course of a year, employees are asked to learn new skills, improve in targeted areas, change behaviors, and adjust to new job responsibilities, technology or a new work location or boss.

It's typical at this time of year for managers to ask whether there is a "key" to motivating employees or increasing performance levels. So much goes into why employees perform or don't perform. It's a complex mix of attitude, aptitude, skill, personality, their fit with the organizational culture, their relationship with their immediate supervisor, and other factors.

While I wish it weren't so...the "key" to unlocking high-level performance is not a one-stop solution. It requires a disciplined approach to understanding an employee's level of effort, performance and motivation. Managers who ask good questions and apply solid problem solving methods have a better chance at breaking the complexity into

manageable pieces; and thus can understand where to focus their efforts to motivate their employees. This approach takes patience. Over time, managers can use their problem solving abilities to understand the true causes of performance outcomes and the best methods for motivating their employees.



Managers are Problem Solvers

One of the biggest challenges for managers is the level of multi-tasking that's required on the job. Managers commonly become distracted by meetings, administrative tasks, downsizing, acquisitions, reorganizations, implementing new systems, and short-term deadlines. This often causes detachment or distraction from their employees' needs, goals and performance levels.

I worked with one manager who, upon receiving his 360-degree-feedback results at the end of a very hectic year, was crest-fallen at the results that indicated he had become an "absentee manager." His disappointment was driven from the fact that he'd progressed in his own career based in part on the coaching and mentoring he'd received from his previous bosses – and now he felt he'd failed his own employees. Fortunately, he recognized this and took steps to remedy the situation for the next performance year by incorporating employee meetings and regular feedback into the scope of his multi-tasking.

Problem solving requires that managers see a situation or issue from a broad perspective.

When they become distracted because of immediate demands on their time, they overlook important causes of performance problems.

Anyone familiar with W. Edwards Demingⁱ would recall that he believed that employee failure is most likely a result of a problem in the system rather than the employee. Using Deming's philosophy, then, managers can treat performance issues as an opportunity to problem solve.

A manager can uncover malfunctions in the system that may have contributed to an employee's failure. For example, she can investigate whether the hiring process was faulty or whether adequate resources were available for the person to perform adequately. Similarly, managers can seek to understand root causes of poor performance or identify ways to enhance performance.

A variety of problem solving models exist in the management literature. One model, offered by The Foundation for Critical Thinkingⁱⁱ suggests that we should always check the quality of our reasoning about a problem or situation. They advocate that we use good questioning techniques to understand the problem, situation or issue.

For example, some of the questions a manager might want to ask when faced with a performance or motivation issue might be:

- Do I have a clear picture of the situation?
- Is this accurate? How could I verify this?
- Am I being specific enough?
- Are my hunches or the facts at hand relevant given the situation?
- What are the complexities of this issue?
- How deep does this problem actually go?
- How broad is this issue – Do I need other perspectives?
- Do I have a logical explanation for the problem?
- Is this the critical issue - what is most important to tackle first?
- Am I being unbiased in my assessment of the situation – am I representing other people's viewpoints as well as my own?

Managers who apply good, consistent problem solving methods to employee motivation will,

over time, find that motivating high-level performance becomes easier. *Note, I didn't say "easy" - just easier.* Additionally, managers who learn from the problems they solve will likely find that they repeat fewer mistakes and become less likely to apply "band-aid" solutions to solving complex human performance issues.



Diagnosing Problems

Solving problems requires that we dig for the true causes of the situation instead of being satisfied with surface or overly simplistic explanations. Following are some examples of how problem solving has been effectively applied.

High turnover – symptom or root cause? I once coached a Call Center Manager who, despite her history as an effective manager, had a turnover problem in her department. Upon analysis of the call center job descriptions we discovered that the jobs had changed over the past year. The call takers had in the past been asked to talk with customers about simple topics that required 5-10 minutes of online research and conversation with customers. However, the call center customers had increased in scope and sophistication and their questions were now requiring up to two hours of research. The profile for a call taker who was capable of doing this type of research was much different from the call taker of the past. Therefore, once the Call Center Manager changed the job description she was able to recruit more appropriate call takers and her turnover decreased.

Appreciate the individual's unique capabilities. I once worked in a department in which one of the administrative assistants was failing. She was extremely bright and well organized but unpleasant to talk with on most days and generally seemed unmotivated. Her boss decided to move her to a different administrative role working in a department that required more vendor management and

independent problem solving. In this role, her performance visibly improved – as it turned out she was bored in her previous role and really thrived on the contact with vendors.

Hiring for the correct competencies – You get what you "hired for". In many instances, I've seen employees hired because they have capabilities or qualities that are lacking in existing employees within the organization. This can be a yellow flag for a hiring manager. If a candidate stands out from existing employees, it may indicate that the organization does not necessarily value the qualities or capabilities that the potential employee possesses. For example, one organization I worked for hired a young maverick to turnaround a department that was failing. They liked the manager's innovative and hard-charging nature. Several months into the job, however, the manager began to get feedback that he was too innovative, moving too fast and lacked respect for the organization's culture and past traditions. He became frustrated and began to doubt his abilities to lead the group. Over time, the manager understood that his innovative nature got him the job but was not going to allow him to move up in the organization unless he adapted to the organization's slower-paced culture. Hiring managers who want to bring in people who "stand out" need to ensure they are prepared to "get what they asked for" and appropriately prepare and coach the newly hired employee.

Would a high-quality employee want to work in your department? This question requires that a manager open himself to feedback and criticism. Most workplaces today have people who work more than 40 hours per week, struggle to balance work and home life and desire an opportunity to make a difference in their work place. Therefore, managers who take a step back and consider the climate of their own department may identify some root causes of why employees leave or opt to take other jobs. I had the pleasure of working with a Senior Vice President at one point in my career who decided to take an entire year to revamp his department of 300 people. During this year he worked with his executive team to build their teamwork and decision making

skills. In addition he restructured parts of the organization to allow for increased cross-training, development opportunities and exposure to the larger business. He said that during this year, he had to sacrifice meeting certain goals that impacted his own annual bonus opportunity but he didn't think he really had a choice given that turnover among high performers had been increasing and high-level job candidates were choosing to work elsewhere.

Be brave – look realistically at your own management style. Again, managers who are brave enough to look honestly at their own impact on employees may find room for improvement. I once read an article written by a successful executive who had at one time been fired from his job as a hard-charging middle manager in a large Fortune 500 company. While the failure he experienced was painful, the point of the article was that he learned from that pain. Research on executive success suggests that personal hardships can be developmental, especially if the person chooses to learn from that hardship. In the book *The Lessons of Experience*ⁱⁱ, demotions, missed promotions, subordinate performance problems, and poor judgment that led to business mistakes are listed as hardships that some executives endured early or mid-way through their careers and then overcame because they learned from their mistakes. According to the authors, the ability to take a step back and learn from your own failings and limitations can be helpful to managers who want to achieve success as executives.



Change and Performance

Individual change is a choice and, ultimately, it is the employee who decides how well, or how poorly, to perform on a given job. This of course doesn't mean it's all about attitude or that it's all in the employee's control to make this decision. As I've suggested, managers can influence this choice.

The empowerment research has something to teach us as well. The Gallup Organization's research^{iv} indicates that managers can use very simple behaviors and tactics to increase performance. For example, managers may find that performance increases when they regularly recognize employees' efforts, encourage their development, show respect for their employees' opinions or ensure that they know what is expected of them at work. This research also shows that cultural factors can enhance performance. For example, having training and development opportunities or working alongside people who strive to do quality work can enhance performance.

Related research from Marcus Buckingham's book *First, Break All the Rules* suggests that the best performers' level of performance tends to be related to their relationship with their manager.^v Positive relationships motivate high performers to work at a higher level while more negative relationships tend to motivate high performers to leave their jobs for other career opportunities.

Finally, given the current rate of change within organizations, employees often make decisions about how to perform based on their willingness to accept changes that impact themselves or their team.^{vi} Some decide to

"lay low" until the changes subside. Others forge ahead, performing at their best despite the pain of the changes they face. While again, this is based on a complex set of factors, managers can establish a fair playing field for employees to ensure that those who decide to forge ahead are recognized and reinforced for their efforts. These employees can often create a critical mass – encouraging those who are "laying low" to take steps toward a higher level of performance. On the other hand if employees who embrace the change are not recognized, overworked or receive inadequate direction from their leaders they can reinforce the "laying low" behavior in their co-workers.



In Summary...it's clear that motivation is a complex topic but there are options for managers who want to unravel the complexity. Research indicates that the manager is an important part of what motivates high performance. Creating discipline in your management style and approach to solving problems will help you to improve your own effectiveness as a manager and inspire a higher-level of performance in your employees.

Anne Offner, Ph.D. is the owner/principle of Offner and Associates, a change management and leadership development consulting firm. She works with organizations & individuals to maximize performance, effectiveness and satisfaction in the workplace.

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ⁱ See for example, <http://www.deming.org>

ⁱⁱ The Foundation for Critical Thinking, <http://www.criticalthinking.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ McCall, M.W., Lombardo, M.M., & Morrison, A.M. (1988). *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executive Develop on the Job*. NY: The Free Press.

^{iv} See the Gallup Organization's website and publications on their *12 Questions* for details:

<http://gmj.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=811>

^v Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. NY: Simon and Schuster.

^{vi} D.B. Fedor, S. Caldwell, D.M Herold. (2006). The effects of organizational changes on employee commitment: a multilevel investigation, *Personnel Psychology*. 59 (1); p. 1.