How to Spot Employees Who Are Beginning to Struggle – And What to Do About It

By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

I can easily say that one of the biggest challenges of managing and leading employees is identifying and working with those who are struggling in their job. When not recognized and, more importantly, not dealt with, employees who are not meeting the minimum work expectations can have damaging effects on a company. These may include unacceptable product/service quality; distress shared with other employees, resulting in lower morale; and co-workers having to pick up the low performer's slack. So it is critical that managers recognize the warning signs of struggling employees.

Most of the time, a struggling employee will display their distress through noticeable shifts in behavior (observable actions) or attitude (temporary states of thought and feeling). When an employee is beginning to struggle in their job, managers need to focus their attention on work behaviors seen in (1) job duties, (2) competencies and (3) conduct issues.

Warning Signs

First, let's talk about job duties. This is the "what" of the job: what the employee is paid to do. When an employee has been performing the "what" of their job at a level of expectation but they are beginning to miss expected work quotas and levels of expected performance, they are signaling to you that something is off. I once had an employee who started making mistakes that were significant enough that they triggered formal disciplinary action. They were a tenured employee that was well respected for doing quality work, but suddenly their work product became sloppy. After a long discussion, the employee disclosed to me that they were absolutely burned out from the job and needed a career change. This of course translated into more discussions, but the point is that change in ability to perform their job function is always a sign that an employee is experiencing some problems. If the problems go unaddressed, the company can suffer in a variety of ways.

The second behavior to watch for is noticeable shifts in competency performance. Competencies are the knowledge, skill and ability to do the work; they are the "how" of the job: how the work gets done. I've worked for multiple companies that rate job performance on competencies and have had nice rating scales to help rate levels of competency performance. Work competencies may include customer service, initiative, accountability, teamwork, job knowledge, planning and organizing, leadership and communication. If an employee appears to be meeting expectations for their job duties but, for example, the communication is beginning to not meet expectations, we should be on the alert that the employee may be experiencing some challenges. Though communication may seem like a qualitative and vague aspect of work, it really isn't. Communication is about expressing ideas clearly and concisely and encouraging two-way interactions with a balance of listening and speaking. Take an employee who normally keeps others informed, maintains an open flow of dialogue across departments and is both diplomatic and articulate when they speak. This would be considered meeting communication expectations. Then you notice a shift in their communication competency behavior; their personal agendas begin to interfere with open communication, they are unwilling to communicate directly with the team and resort to triangulating communication and they have trouble maintaining professional relationships. This should signal to you that the employee is displaying their distress in "how" they do their job.

The third factor to look for is basic challenges to policies and procedures, often referred to as conduct issues. These aren't "can't" issues; they are "won't" issues. Conduct issues may include not adhering to the work schedule (e.g., coming in late, leaving early or taking longer than allowed breaks), dress code infractions, company theft, etc. These are backed by company-recognized policies and procedures, and infractions should be warning signs that an employee is experiencing problems and may pose future risk.

Earlier I mentioned that a struggling employee will also display their distress through noticeable shifts in attitude (temporary states of thought and feeling). From a work perspective, attitudes are difficult to actually work with because they can be very subjective in nature. These temporary states of thought or feeling can be seen in a lack of motivation, fatigue, a loss of focus, lost emotional connection and an overall diminished well-being. None of these can be used to document poor performance because they are subjective and open to interpretation. They can, and probably should, become part of the conversation with a struggling employee but should never be documented as a performance issue.

In summary, great managers are closely watching for noticeable shifts in (1) job duties (the "what") that were once met but are now falling below minimum expectations, (2) competencies (the "how") that were once met but are now falling below minimum expectations and (3) policies and procedures not being adhered to. Remember that a shift in attitude (a temporary state of thought and feeling) may be noticeable but is very subjective and should be left out of any documentation for performance improvement.

Why Warning Signs Are Missed

It sounds rather basic to notice when job duties, competencies and conduct issues are not meeting expectations, but why do so many managers miss these warning signs? One reason is that managers are not trained to see the subtle behaviors that struggling employees often display. The reason for this is the oversimplified belief that employees are either doing the work or not doing the work; there's no recognition for anything in between.

I once worked with an administrator that told their employees that when they entered the workplace, they were to turn on "work mode" and shut off "personal mode" – like a light switch. Obviously, when an employee accepts a job, they basically enter into a contract where they do certain work in return for income and agree to this "on mode" expectation. I can tell you that the administrator I am referring to had no basic understanding of human behavior in the workplace, obviously struggled to engage their teams and didn't seem to care that much anyway.

So the expectation appears simple enough that when you show up for work, you are "on" and when you leave, you are allowed to be "off." This sounds simple enough but just isn't always the case. Most work behavior exists on a continuum, and great managers are able to detect early on the warning signs that an employee is struggling through drops in meeting expectations of (1) job duties, (2) competencies and (3) conduct.

The real problem is that many managers do not take the time to check in and have one-on-ones with their employees. One-on-ones are golden opportunities to talk about expectations as they relate to job duty outcomes (the "what" of the work) and competencies (the "how" of the work). They are also times to give feedback on performance. If these meetings and check-ins do not take place, the manager doesn't find out about the poor performance until it is too late. Then the manager moves into a reactive mode, putting out fires and not truly serving the organization as a whole.

Solutions

It is one thing to notice shifts in work behavior, but I'm always more interested in the solutions. If you are documenting correctly and you note that there is a noticeable shift in performance, you start to lean on your progressive discipline and performance improvement policies to either (1) coach the employee in or (2) coach the employee out. Recognizing that something is off with an employee but doing nothing about it is simply the result of a manager not doing what they are paid to do. The following are what I consider to be essential skills for good managers.

Frequent check-ins. Managers are ultimately paid to help their team perform at or above expectation in order to create economic value for a company. Managers need to do micro check-ins with their team members on a weekly basis. This will increase the level of trust between the manager and the employee and provide a pulse of the employee's status.

Formal one-on-one performance coaching meetings. These are, in my opinion, the most valuable tool to help employees perform. They can range from 30 minutes to an hour in length and should occur, at a minimum, once a month. All jobs are different, and for those that are more complex, such meetings should be held more often. If you don't have time to perform one-on-ones, your team is too big or you have larger organizational issues that are pulling you in the wrong direction. I suggest that employees come prepared to these meetings, ready to talk about their job duties and competencies. In fact, I suggest that employees walk in having already scored their performance using some form of a Likert Scale. They should score both job duties and competencies based on actual performance. Then, during the one-on-ones, the manager and employee can dialogue about the "what" and "how" of the work. These scores can then translate into quarterly, semi-annual or annual performance reviews. Now there is no excuse to not see the warning signs of an employee that is beginning to struggle and, more importantly, help coach them into better performance.

Progressive discipline and performance improvement policies.

Finally, smart companies have polices for progressive discipline and performance improvement that provide a framework for how to get an employee back on track or off your team. If the manager has done everything they can to help coach the employee back on track but the employee is still struggling, together the manager and employee craft a "suggested plan for improvement" outlining exactly what the employee needs to do to meet the demands of the job, including how the manager will provide feedback on performance. If the employee does not follow through, they will continue to move down the progression steps to termination. When this is done correctly, most employees will check out on their own if they are not up to the challenge; this is referred to as coaching an employee out. Employees that are up to the challenge will take the initiative to follow through and get back on track; this is referred to as coaching an employee in.

Summary

Life is complicated, and work behavior is not as simple as "on" or "off" performance. Work is not the center of our universe, and people will naturally bring their personal challenges with them to work. It is the manager's job to observe performance, especially when expectations are not being met. It is also the manager's job to create action plans for poor performers to either get on the bus or off. As I said earlier, working with employees who are beginning to struggle in their job is one of the most challenging tasks of a manager, but it is what they are being paid to do. When it is done correctly, managers can focus their energies on the whole: creating economic value for their organization by empowering, liberating and unleashing their team's talent.

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