10 Ways Managers Can Improve Worker Performance

By Jim Tallman

Most managers are charged with improving the performance of their workforce in order to get higher production and better quality at lower cost. Try as they might, often they can't seem to make much headway and in frustration resign themselves to living with the status quo and its attendant problems. However, there are ways that you can apply to improve your workers' performance. Here are ten strategies that you can apply right away.

Strategy 1: Ensure your employees have the proper tools, equipment or materials, in good repair, they need to do their job.

A few years ago I was working on a training project for an open-pit coal mine high on the east slope of the Rocky Mountains. I was in the cab of a drilling rig one day to collect content for the lessons while nearby, an excavator was loading haul trucks with rocks and dirt. I noticed the trucks were lined up two or three at a time, idling 10 or 15 minutes before getting a load, and burning diesel fuel and driver time. It didn't take long to see why. Normally an excavator fills a truck in three or four loads and the truck departs. It was taking this operator 13 buckets to fill each truck.

But on this machine, the teeth on the bucket were so worn down the operator couldn't come close to filling the bucket because he couldn't really dig into the ground—just sort of scrape away at it—about as effective as someone with no teeth trying to eat corn on the cob. The bucket needed new teeth and no amount of training, cajoling or positive thinking was going to enable that operator to perform any faster until they were installed. The cost of the new teeth was overshadowed by the cost of the waiting trucks and the operator performing at one-third the efficiency he should have been.

Make sure your workers' performance isn't being hampered by a lack of tools, equipment or materials. Ask them if there are tools they need added, fixed, or replaced so they can work more effectively. You may be surprised what you learn. Do your best to get them what they need.

Strategy 2: Make sure performance standards are known.

We find that in many of the companies we go into, performance standards are not known—by the managers or the workers. Or they can only state the standards in the most general of terms. As a result, expectations around performance standards—quantity, quality and rate of production—are vague and they tend to change from day to day, depending on the manager's memory or the level of the production pressure. Employees are unsure as to how their work will be evaluated. Confusion reigns and performance suffers.

To eliminate the uncertainty, establish written, measurable performance standards for every critical task in each job that falls under your area of responsibility, and ensure that both workers and supervisors have access to them. If workers don't have the knowledge and skills to meet them, provide training that is built with the attainment of the standards as its core.

Strategy 3: Make sure your employees have the knowledge and skills they need to do their job well.

Managers often see training as a magic wand that will solve all kinds of performance issues, but the reality is it can only resolve two issues: a lack of skill or a lack of knowledge. Where these conditions exist, training is the solution.

How do you determine if there is a lack of skill or knowledge? Ask incumbents to explain or demonstrate *how* the job *should* be done. If they are able to respond correctly, it's not a training issue. If they can't, then training is the answer.

How do you determine what to teach? Here's what I see happen in many companies: the trainers (who are often the managers) decide what will go into the training based on what they know best, or what they were taught, or what they have experience with, or what the text books contain. But all of these paths lead to less than optimal training and learning.

The question they should be asking is, "What do my workers need to know or do for *improved job performance*?" Holding to that context keeps your training job-focused. Make sure your training always speaks directly to improving your workers' performance.

So now take a look at your work place and ask yourself:
1. Do my employees have the proper tools, equipment and materials to do their job well?
2. Are performance standards written down and does everyone know what they are?
3. Are you training to improve performance, not just increase knowledge?

Strategy 4: Make sure your workers get the practice they need.

For tasks that are done many times a day or week, workers get their practice without even noticing it. For tasks that are not done regularly

and can be performed without urgency, there are usually standard operating procedures and manuals that employees can refer to.

But for tasks that are performed infrequently or are complex in nature, or for which it is critical that the task is performed to standard every time, they need practice. Practice is what puts new skills into long term memory; it is also what keeps the paths open for rarely-performed activities. It's the reason schools and offices have fire drills, for example—people may only have to evacuate a burning building once in their lives, maybe never, but when the alarm goes off, they need to know immediately what to do. No time to read the floor plan, no time to read the instructions on the fire extinguisher. They need to know from memory and practice what to do the moment the alarm sounds.

Ask yourself about the practice your workers get:
1. Have tasks been identified in terms of their frequency of performance and their criticality (what would happen if they are not done immediately and to standard)?
2. Do you have a written schedule of practice sessions for those tasks?
3. Are the tasks always performed in their entirety during the practice sessions, so that people practice everything they need to know and do?

Think of formal practice sessions as refresher training. And as training, ensure that all performers are being tested to the task standards.

Strategy 5: Eliminate task interference—the conditions that interrupt workers in the performance of their duties.

Consider an employee who is trying to write a report but is regularly interrupted by co-workers who drop by for advice on computer problems or other technical guidance.

Every time they knock on his door and ask, "Got a minute?" they interrupt the report writer's train of thought. Plus if he answers, "Sure, what's up?" it's 15 or 30 minutes at least before he can get back to his report, get refocused and pick up where he left off. All it takes is two or three times interruptions and he's lost a couple of what should have been productive hours, and has to scramble to get the report in on time.

Or perhaps you have a trainer who is also a key team member, another go-to person, who gets called out of the classroom several times a day to help with a production crisis or meet with vendors. Not only is it interfering with the trainer's time, it's impacting the learning time of everyone in the class.

Task interference can be blatantly obvious or very subtle. Either way, it diminishes the employee's performance. Many of the reasons can only be resolved by management. So in your workplace, do your employees face:

1. Unnecessary distractions on a daily basis?
2. Policy or procedural restrictions that are no longer applicable, or that are unnecessarily cumbersome?
3. Shortage of the tools, equipment or materials they need, requiring them to search in the office or plant until they find what they need?
4. Other duties that regularly override what they are trying to get done?
5. Do they have enough time to finish a task, or do they have to leave in the middle of it and go to another one?

In addition to your own observations, ask your employees the same questions. What emerges may surprise both them and you.

Strategy 6: Ensure job performance is measured.

Having performance standards in place is one thing; if you don't use them is another. If you don't actively engage workers in their task standards, you are missing a major opportunity to improve performance. One of the most

effective and useful ways to do that is to measure performance in terms of the performance standards.

If you don't measure performance, your workers may think they are performing in an acceptable manner when in actuality they aren't. Even if the performance standards are in place and are known, without measurement employees work by their own interpretation of how well they are doing, and that may be somewhat different than what you or their supervisor expects.

Strategy 7: Ensure performance measurement is done accurately.

Measuring performance is good, but only if it is done accurately. If it's not, the stage is set for unfair and faulty conclusions.

Check to see if the measurements are being done objectively or subjectively. Are they done on an ad hoc basis by a supervisor who is feeling good one day and not so good the next, with measurement results that reflect those varying states? Are they done consistently, or only when the supervisor remembers or gets around to it, or only after an incident? If an employee's performance is measured by different evaluators, do the results vary?

Were the measurements developed in conjunction with the performance standards? Because if they weren't, workers and evaluators are probably confused as to what the performance rating is actually based upon.

Strategy 8: Ensure there are no negative consequences for performance.

One of the most common workplace scenarios, in companies large and small, occurs when an employee is recognized as a good performer, someone who can be counted on to come through when the going gets tough. The reward for all that good work? More work! Yes, even more work loaded onto their already busy schedule. After a while, even the most eager of eager beavers starts to question the value of being at the top of the performance pyramid.

Many years ago, I was asked to write an e-learning course in five days. The length of the course would normally take three weeks to a month, but it was an important client and future contracts were at stake. So on Monday morning, I closed the door to my office, hunched down and pounded out the product, 12 to 14 hours a day for five days. I made the Friday afternoon deadline and then went home and slept for most of the weekend. I was still recovering the next Monday. The good part of the story is that the client was very happy with what I'd done, especially given the short timelines, and that client relationship continued for many years afterwards. The not so good news, at least for me, was that my company started bidding all their projects based on the time I'd been able to do it for that project. They'd seen it was possible and expected me to perform to that level every time. Not long after I left the company.

In addition to being overloaded with more work, there are sometimes other unintended results from good performance. High performers can burn out, unable to sustain their performance under increasing pressures. Their peers may resent the high performer because it makes them look mediocre. If peer relationships are important to the employee, he or she may reduce the effort so as not to stand out so much.

Talk to your employees. See where they feel their good performance leads them to bad consequences. Have they been working on tasks that are physically or mentally exhausting, with no real chance to recover? Tasks that are unpleasant or difficult, or just unbearably tedious? If you find examples of these issues, look for ways to reduce the negative aspects surrounding the task.

Strategy 9: Ensure there are positive consequences for performance.

A lack of positive consequences for good performance will soon demotivate even the strongest self-starter. Everyone likes to hear that they are doing a good job—especially when they are.

Make sure the rewards and incentives are valued by your employees. Don't give them tickets to the ballet if they're more interested in combat fighting events.

What happens when your employees do a good job? Are they recognized for doing so? By just you, or by their peers and others in the company? Do you or your supervisors give feedback for the performance you want to see? Is the job set up so that workers are able to achieve some sort of inner satisfaction?

Again, talk to your people with these questions and see what turns up, and if necessary, seek better and consistent ways to reward them.

Strategy 10: Address mismatched abilities.

Sometimes, for a variety of physical, mental or emotional reasons, individuals are not able to perform a job to standard. As much as they may want to do a good job, they can't, and probably never will. It becomes stressful for them and pulls down the performance of the entire work unit.

If you have a member of your team who is exhibiting these behaviours, consider if the innate capacity is present, or whether you need to transfer the individual to an area in the company where he or she can be successful.

There are many more reasons for non-performance on the job, but these 10 are some of the most common, and are ones that managers can do something about.

If any of these are issues in your workplace, implement the strategies suggested here and watch performance start to improve, production go up and costs come down.

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