

ATTITUDE PROBLEMS

Whether it's staff with a relaxed attitude to making mistakes or ones who slack off and don't pull their weight, something must be done before their colleagues revolt. Stewart Forsyth has the answers.



Whatever!

We have a few young people in the organisation who have a very 'relaxed' reaction to making errors in their work. If an error is pointed out to them the standard response seems to be "Whatever!" How can we motivate them to take more care?

Possibly these people can't see the problems that such errors will cause. You may have to expand their imaginations. Or they may enjoy the attention that their approach produces. Inadvertently you may be making them heroes in their minds.

First you need to ask yourself the following: are you clear about what accuracy is, and have you succeeded in making it clear to everyone? Younger staff may not have been around long enough to absorb the standards that longer stayers have picked up.

As the problematic people seem to be in a minority, it would probably be useful to bring them into a group where the majority do maintain high levels of accuracy, and have a discussion about the implications of errors. For example, one percent error rates might not sound like much, but if you're riding the Space Shuttle they are horrific odds. What are the consequences of errors—what rework, what de-

lays, what orders at risk, what does it do to the image of the unit for quality? It can be motivating to bring a customer—either internal or external—to the discussion. Ask them to tell stories about quality and errors.

Personalising the process by having a real person talk about how they appreciate quality and the problems they have with errors brings the issue from over the horizon to right here.

Clarify the accuracy standards and discuss how these are assessed. Agree an ongoing assessment and review process. This could combine self, peer, and customer-assessment as well as supervisor's assessment.

Slackers

We're currently in the midst of a major project requiring extra work from staff. Most have leapt to the challenge, but two or three people are not pulling their weight and it's now being commented on by other team members. Any suggestions for how best to deal with this?

This appears to be a classic performance deficit issue. I recommend Mager and Pipe's systems approach to diagnosing such issues (*Analyzing Performance Problems*, 1991).

Maybe your team members

can't, rather than won't, pull their weight. There may be a skill gap, or a lack of 'self-efficacy' belief in their own capability. Maybe they have commitments they believe they can't put aside—like providing support to others in the organisation or outside commitments they feel can't be moved.

Maybe they have been punished for contributing in a similar way before. There is a famous experiment where monkeys were left in a room with a tall pole and bananas on top. When the bravest one almost got up the pole to the bananas, the evil experimenters doused it with cold water (not nice!).

When some of the monkeys were replaced with new team members the old team members persuaded the new monkeys not to climb the pole. As the old monkeys were replaced by new members of the group the time came when there were no monkeys who'd experienced or even seen the cold water treatment left in the group. But still newcomers were discouraged from going after the bananas. It is easy to teach monkeys (or people) to avoid doing something.

Maybe those pulling less than their weight are rewarded for not making the extra effort—being a 'passenger' does have its

rewards. This situation calls for a face-to-face discussion with each of these individuals.

Give them feedback on their performance against the usual work expectations. Then give them feedback on the expectations of their contribution during peak times, and the gap observed at present. Use 'I' not 'we' when describing their performance. ('I expect you to be leading this part of the project, but instead what I see is ...').

You need to be seen owning this feedback. If you talk about the views of others you will be seen as seeking safety in numbers. Obviously you will need to have good information about what they are and are not doing so that the performance gaps you describe are real and credible.

Ask them for their perception. Get them to outline the thinking and assumptions behind their perception. Build up their belief in their capability. Help to remove obstacles. Agree goals for performance, and do this as precisely as you can. Commit to providing ongoing feedback. **et**

Stewart Forsyth runs FX Consultants, specialists in creative approaches to lifting businesses performance. See www.fxc.co.nz

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