August 13, 2007

I want to thank you all for the questions you have been sending in – keep them coming! In this week's Food for Thought, I am combining a couple of questions and relating them to a real world situation to help explain my answer.

All of you deal with problem employees every day. A common school of thought is that training is a "magic pill" that can fix every employee problem. This is not always the best solution as you will understand from this week's article. Please enjoy and I hope this advice will help you with a situation in your organization!

Is training the right answer for a problem employee?   It depends…..
by Scott Playfair, President, P Squared

Recently, I was invited to a local client's place of business to discuss the types of training offered by P Squared Consulting. The client had a problem employee whose behavior was noted as autocratic, unsympathetic, demonstrative - sometimes bordering on sexual harassment. The client was interested in 1-2 days of training and development to make this employee more sensitive.   The client wanted to know if P Squared had a training course that would correct this employee's behavior.

Intrigued, I put on my Columbo rumpled raincoat and began to ask many questions. And in true Columbo style, I asked, hypothetically, "If you put a gun to this guy's head and told him to fix all this stuff, could he fix it?" The answer was, "Yes he could, but he chooses not to."

It was then evident that this was not a training problem.   Training problems are issues such as people not having the knowledge or ability to perform a task. So in translation, if you hypothetically put a gun to their head, they could not do what was asked.

Through further questioning, I learned that this employee's boss had "kind of" spoken with him but, to the outside world, the common attitude was "Well, he makes the numbers, who cares how he does it!" This was clearly their number one problem. This employee would never change his behavior as long as he was being rewarded without changing it. In fact, I personally question if he was counseled at all. Yes, he got the numbers - but at what cost? What hidden damage has been done in terms of employee demotivation, dissatisfaction and possible turnover? Furthermore, what improvements in the numbers could be generated if these problematic issues were resolved?

So, was training the answer?

Training actually had nothing to do with the answer. Because this person, if properly motivated could have fixed his own problem. In fact, he needed to be provided with an environment that motivated him to fix the problem. Typically, this would be initiated by his supervisor and would have consisted of clear problem identification and a jointly developed, concise action plan with high accountability and follow-up.

Depending on the employee-supervisor relationship, the supervisor may sometimes choose to bring in an impartial third party to mentor/coach the employee once

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proper expectations have been set. I mentioned that coaching and mentoring is one of the areas of expertise provided by P Squared.

After describing this to the potential client, he said, "Your process and logic make all the sense in the world and I agree with it. However, I've spoken to our VP of HR and we are just going to send him to a 2 day training class and hope it works". The client might as well have taken the money and burned it because, as I just explained, training was not the issue at all.

This is an example of avoidance behavior by a corporation. They want to do something /anything that seems to be politically correct - showing activity but not ruffling any feathers, when, in fact, no progress will be made at addressing the core issue. Actually, the situation will probably be made worse because people will see the problem employee being sent off to training with no change in behavior upon his return. This will result in "charm school" jokes and a further decline in morale.

So, training and development of your employees, done properly, can be an excellent source of productivity improvement and employee motivation… but it is not always the answer for a problem employee. The problem must be properly diagnosed and then the proper strategy and tools can be applied.

And don't forget…

Free Consulting! Send me the number one issue (in the areas of business process improvement, productivity, employee motivation, employee development, or goal achievement) that is keeping you from achieving your desired future state and I will provide my thoughts (free consulting) in upcoming issues of Food for Thought.

Please email your questions to srplayfair@p2mc.com

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