Why Trying Harder is Not the Answer to Poor Performance

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Jim likes to go to the gym every weekday afterwork. On Monday, he promised his wife that he would pick up the dry cleaning after leaving the gym. He forgot. On Monday evening, she reminded him and he promised to get it on Tuesday after completing his workout. For a second time, he came home on Tuesday without the dry cleaning.

His wife is now somewhat exasperated and asked him what it will take for him to remember to pick up the dry cleaning on Wednesday. His reply, " I'll try harder tomorrow to remember it!"

Of course we realize that this response does not guarantee any different response than that of the previous two days. Is Jim suggesting that he did not remember to pick up the dry cleaning because he was not trying hard enough? What does "trying harder" entail?

If we discard "trying harder" as a guarantee of success, what steps can be taken to insure that the dry cleaning is picked up? A couple of solutions should come to mind and they both include actions to insure that success is not dependent upon Jim's memory.

Jim could program his phone with a reminder timed to go off when his gym time is ending. He could tape a reminder on the dash of his car or he could ask his wife to call or text a reminder. The odds of succeeding will now improve significantly!

You and performance management

HR professionals are more involved with performance management than any others in the organization. As managers, not only do we have performance issues in our own department to deal with, we are also asked to assist managers throughout the organization as they address performance.

Addressing gross misbehavior or policy violations may be unpleasant, but how

they are dealt with is often pretty straightforward. However, dealing with work performance deficiencies is sometimes harder.

Often, there is no big policy violation or behavior that is inappropriate–it is simply that the work of the employee is substandard. This can be either a single episode or a pattern of poor work performance.

The response that accomplishes nothing

The employee is counseled on the poor performance. Too often, the reaction is the same as Jim's–"I'll have to try harder" or "I'll have to remember to do that" or "I'll try harder not to forget".

And, too often, the manager accepts that response. The manager can document that the employee was counseled and agreed to improve by trying harder. This is helpful because when the employee is counseled later for the same performance issue, the manager can produce the documentation showing the employee that s/he had agreed to improve performance!

Dealing with the "try harder" response

When dealing with poor performance, the first step is to determine if it is an employee or process problem. What is meant by that?

The same error that is repeated or occurs with multiple employees is usually not a performance problem but a process problem.

For example, the hospital has a centralized scheduling department that is responsible for scheduling all inpatient and outpatient procedures. Call time is tracked to determine how it takes to schedule a procedure.

If the call time is excessive for all schedulers and patients are complaining, then it is most likely a process problem. Something in the scheduling process is leading to long call times. It is not the performance of the employees that is the problem and it would be of no benefit to address their performance. It is the process that needs be fixed.

On the other hand, if one scheduler has lengthy call times and/or complaints, then

it may be due to his/her performance. Further investigation may be needed to insure that this employee does not have substandard equipment, deals with more detailed procedures, etc.

The second step is to not accept "I'll try harder" responses. Any response where the solution is for the employee to work harder, try harder, remember more, concentrate more is begging for follow-up.

The manager should always follow up this type of response by identifying specific behaviors and actions that will improve performance. Being more intense (trying harder) is not the answer, but specific actions are!

In the example of the schedulers, lets say that Susie has excessive call times. There are no process issues–it is simply that Susie is empathetic and likes to talk. Her intentions are good, but before she knows it, she is engaged in conversation with the caller.

Rather than "try harder", what steps can be taken to improve her call times? You may have different ones but two come to mind: (1) manager listens on calls to coach Susie, (2) a timer is put on the desk in front of Susie with a set time for each call. This lets her know in real time how she is doing. Perhaps the rule is that when she is over the set time for one call, another must be under by the same amount.

The point is that specific actions are prescribed to address the poor performance.

The manager's role

An overlooked part of addressing poor performance is often the responsibility of the manager. It is easy to lay it all on the employee, but does the manager have any role in improving poor performance?

When dealing with poor performance, I always follow up by asking "what can I do to help you improve?" Sometime there are changes that need to be made, sometimes additional equipment/supplies are needed–most often it is follow-up and oversight that is needed. We often agree to have a follow meeting after a certain amount of time.

Standardized format

A standardized form helps insure that "I'll try harder" responses are not accepted. For poor performance, I suggest a form that identifies the performance issue at the top, and then lists the action steps that will be taken to correct the problem. A line is drawn down the middle of the form, One side is labeled "employee" and the other "manager". For each step, both the employee's and the manager's responsibilities are outlined.

Poor performance can be improved and it is part of your job to see that it is. It is not difficult. Identify whether it is an employee or system problem. Fix process problems. Address employee problems by rejecting vague responses and accepting both employee and management responsibilities for action steps.