

COACHING, COUNSELING & DISCIPLINE

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR MANAGERS

Although the textbook definition of the job of a manager is “*to plan, organize, direct and control the activities of employees toward a desired outcome,*” actual observation reveals that managers spend their time hiring, training, coaching, counseling, disciplining and terminating employees, in addition to the myriad of other things those who manage a business must do to produce a profit.

Actually, if you carve up your management time, you will discover that you spend very little time hiring and even less terminating employees. Training takes a lot of your time. It is an ongoing effort, both for new and existing employees on new procedures. The majority of management time is spent coaching, counseling and disciplining employees. These are essential skills that help every manager be more effective. You must be a great coach, understand how to counsel employees and know how to administer discipline in such a way that the company will have no post-termination problems.

Today’s workforce offers different challenges than a generation ago. They are well-educated on a variety of subjects. They are culturally diverse and they know their rights. They expect to have input into decision-making instead of blindly accepting the company line. Their trust level is low. The corporate crooks have made certain of that. Some employees look for managerial mistakes that can be invaluable to substantiate those ever looming charges they will take to the watchdog agencies, such as an EEOC or other human rights group.

The job of hiring is a subject another advisory and won’t be discussed in detail here. Hiring requires a working knowledge of employment regulations as well as how to use effective hiring methods to be a good watchdog at the front door of your business. That is how you keep the bad guys out. Good hiring practices can be learned by those who understand that selecting employees is best accomplished using a system that includes tools to augment personal judgments.

The skills to be an effective trainer are also easily learned by those who understand and accept that we need well-trained employees more than they need us. We don’t have enough hours to do all of the work that is to be done and the only way it will get done to our satisfaction is to have well-trained people.

Highly effective managers understand that employees learn by seeing, hearing and trying. It is critical to understand that “*people think in pictures.*” The best trainers I know try everything possible to give the trainees a visual image of what they want them to learn. They know it will cut the training time needed to become proficient.

Coaching, however, is much more difficult to learn. The personal style of the manager is a critical variable. Some managers seem like natural communicators and others are total failures when it comes to interpersonal communications.

Coaching is the time supervisors spend helping employees improve. It is what we do after we have provided basic training and are assured that the employee knows how to do the job. Notice that a sports coach continues to offer advice, instructions and inspiration to players as

long as they are on the team. Typically, a sports coach chooses coaching as a profession and is excited by the opportunity to take a group of young people and mold them into superstars.

Managers, on the other hand, are typically chosen for their role because they are technically proficient at performing some type of operational, sales or administrative function. They are promoted to management as a reward; then dropped into the job with no management training. Ha! It is a recipe for failure. Through luck, trial and error, or tenacity, many managers learn how to make it work.

Management coaches act very much like sports coaches. They are constantly giving feedback, offering suggestions for improvement, providing advice that will help the employee improve, and recognizing employee accomplishments. They know how to inspire, motivate and encourage. Management coaches know their role. They don't do the work; they make certain the team does the work and they coach.

Great coaches understand that giving employee feedback is very different from criticizing. Feedback is specific information, whereas criticism is just an opinion.

Feedback is Food for Change

George, a brilliant guy, offers a good example of the difference between feedback and criticism. He was a stickler for accuracy; a true perfectionist. I saw Amy, his assistant, seated at her desk sobbing. George had angrily returned the finished correspondence she had transcribed for him with a comment, "*Do it over; it is a mess.*" Amy knew he was unhappy with her work but she did not have a clue what was wrong. After a few questions, I was able to learn from George that he did not like the type style she had used and he did not like the margins. He wanted fewer paragraphs on each page and he wanted her to use the type style used in newspapers (*Times New Roman*), which he feels is easy to read. I gave Amy the feedback of what she needed to change. A few minutes later George had an acceptable document on his desk. More feedback and less criticism would have avoided this unfortunate incident.

This is an example of a manager who did not understand the difference between feedback and criticism. Keep in mind that a great coach gives much more feedback than criticism. It is reasonable to expect that well-coached employees will be excellent. But, sometimes, that does not happen. In spite of your best efforts, some employees do not respond to coaching. They have their own ideas of what they want to do or they don't take the process seriously. Even when you remind them that accepting employment requires them to give up their right to decide what they will do at work as long as the request is legal, moral and ethical, some employees do not improve.

Accepting employment requires an employee to give up the right to do as they please.

When performance is suffering, productivity is suffering, and it is determined that ability is not the issue, then it is time to counsel the employee about the problem. Counseling is the time supervisors spend discussing problems with employees, such as communication issues, problems with co-workers, absences, and failure to follow new procedures. This includes personal issues, such as outside issues that interfere with the work.

Managers should not feel counseling should be left to “professionals.” Therapy should be left to professionals, but counseling is a manager’s job. When coaching fails, the manager should prepare for a counseling interview. The steps are:

- Be fully prepared. Have all of the facts about the unsatisfactory performance.
- Ensure privacy. Conduct the counseling interview in an area away from other employees.
- Don’t gang up on the employee. The fewer people present the more likely the employee will be less defensive.
- Don’t be interrupted by the phone or other distractions.
- Use “I” messages, when possible. Tell the employee that you are concerned and that you want the employee to be successful.
- Do whatever is possible to get the employee to accept that a problem exists.
- Be clear about what behavior must change. Use examples about what the employee must do differently to restore their positive relationship with the company.
- Get agreement from the employee that he/she will change.
- Follow up with a memo of understanding that describes what was discussed during the counseling interview. The memo is not a disciplinary action; it is a reminder.

When an employee improves, give the employee immediate recognition. If the employee does not improve, it is time to begin the disciplinary procedure.

**The cornerstones of discipline are
FIRM, FAST, FRANK and FAIR.**

Most companies use *Progressive Discipline*. In reality, progressive discipline is a punishment schedule. It begins with a verbal warning and ends with termination if the problem is not resolved. Each step is fully documented just in case the problem is not resolved and ends in termination.

Progressive discipline extends the time the employee has to resolve whatever problem caused the need for disciplinary action in the first place. Once progressive discipline begins it is up to the employee to make the problem go away. Managers cannot back down. Their

credibility is on the line. Some employees get the message and solve their problem with or without the help of an Employee Assistance Program. Some employees do nothing and eventually lose their jobs.

An effective manager takes no pride in terminating an employee. Managers accept that they are fully responsible for the success or failure of their employees. They take pride in molding their employees into superstars. They understand that creating a successful work team takes a lot of work. They constantly work to improve their ability to coach employees to improve their performance because they are aware the end result is a more successful business.

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NANCYE COMBS has had a distinguished career. She is a voice of authority on Human Resources and Organizational Development. She speaks, consults, writes, and offers expert witness testimony on workplace issues. She is President and Chief Executive Officer of HR Enterprise, Inc., in Louisville, KY and spent twenty years as a corporate business executive before founding a consulting practice in 1986. She provides management advisory services to hundreds of executives in business, industry, education and government in North America, South America, Europe and Asia.

Nancye is the retained consultant for the 1,400 members of Specialty Tools and Fasteners Distributors Association (STAFDA), and works extensively with distributors and manufacturers worldwide. The Petroleum Equipment Institute retained her services for its 1,600 members, the Heating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration Distributors International rely on her expertise for their 1,400 member companies, the Foodservice Equipment Distributors and Manufacturers retain her to advise their members. In 2013, she was retained to advise the members of NAHAD – The National Association of Hose and Accessories Distributors. Dozens of companies credit her for their growth and success. Many turn to her when they face extremely serious human resources, management and organizational issues.

More than 1,000 practicing human resources professionals, who have completed the national certification human resources class she teaches at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY, routinely say, “*She has no peer; she is simply the best.*” The pass rate for the class consistently exceeds the national average by as much as 25%. She is also a member of the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin for the Certified Professional Management Representative (CPMR) Program. As a nationally recognized expert in employment regulations, she has been requested to testify as an expert by leading law firms throughout the United States on issues related to discrimination and sex harassment.

Ms. Combs has been a featured speaker at the White House on programs with the President, the Vice President and Members of the US Cabinet. She was named one of the top women business owners in Louisville and received the Award of Professional Excellence from the Louisville Society for Human Resource Management, which awards a scholarship in her name. She is a member of the Louisville Society for Human Resources Management and The Society for Human Resources Management. She is accredited for life as a Senior Human Resources Professional for accomplishments in her field and graduated from the University of Kentucky and from the University of Louisville with a coveted 4.0 point grade average. She has served as Board Chair for numerous charitable organizations and her services as a member of community service boards are constantly in demand.

Nancye is frequently found on the platform speaking to business executives who want to learn from her. More than 100 articles on managing people at work written by Ms. Combs appear in leading business publications and the press often solicits her views on contemporary business topics. Google her name on the Internet to learn more about the work of Nancye Combs.