CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE FAILURE

One of the great truisms that apply to managing people is: No one comes to work with a desire to fail. Although at times it appears that employees **try** to perform poorly, most everyone actually wants to do a good, or at least adequate, job. So why is it that people sometimes do fail at work? The causes of workplace failure are many and varied, but let’s examine a few of the more common reasons that employees don’t perform up-to-standard.

They do not know how or what they should do. Surprisingly enough, employees sometimes fail because they simply don’t know what is expected of them. Managers frequently make false assumptions about employees’ understanding of both their jobs and the expectations of the workplace. Attributing many of the more basic expectations of the workplace - things such as work attendance, promptness, willingness to help others, etc. - to common sense is a dangerous practice, particularly because common sense isn’t so common anymore. The only way to be certain an employee understands what is expected is to expressly tell him or her.

They fear a negative consequence. The impact of peer pressure can be as significant in the workplace as it was in high school. Many employees succumb to concerns about being ostracized by others in the work group if they perform too well. The general view is that an employee who works quickly and efficiently will raise the standards for everyone else, and co-workers can exert lots of pressure to make sure that doesn’t happen.

They are allowed to not do what they should do. Sometimes, they are even rewarded for not doing what they should do. In some cases, managers are unaware that an employee is performing poorly. More often, though, managers are aware of the performance problem but choose not to address it. This creates a "snowball effect" and the performance of the overall work group gradually declines as others realize there is no penalty for poor performance. Managers’ reluctance to confront performance issues may stem from a variety of causes, one of which does not want to change the rules in the middle of the game. In other words, if the manager has let employees get away with certain behaviors in the past it may seem unfair to "raise the bar" now. Standards and expectations are subject to change, and allowing sub-par performance in the past should not preclude addressing it in the future.

They think they are doing just fine. Most of us operate on the belief that "no news is good news". Thus, employees who are not told that their performance is unacceptable generally don't realize that it is and will continue performing poorly.

They have obstacles limiting their performance. Poor equipment, outdated technology, or a lack of training can prevent an employee from succeeding at his or her job. Sometimes we simply have a round peg in a square hole, which results from a hiring mistake. Placing an employee who, for whatever reason, is not suited for the job is a ticket to that employee's failure.

The implication of all this for managers is that they must carefully examine their influence. Strangely enough, managers generally underestimate the impact of what they do (or don't do) on their employees' performance. Managers' influence exists on both the input side (what is done to get performance started) and the consequence side (what is done or is not done after performance has happened).

Key questions for managers to ask of themselves on the input side are: Do employees know what to do? How to do their work? When to do their work? Keeping in mind that some people are more self-motivated than others, things such as requests, directions, policies, procedures, training, goal setting, and schedules should be considered here.

Logic tells us to expect positive, or pleasant, consequences to result from good performance and negative consequences to result from poor performance. Managers who apply consequences in this manner are most effective in shaping their employees' performance. Items in the manager's tool box in this area are: feedback, praise, criticism, bonuses, raises, recognition, rewards, discipline, and inattention.

Managers play a key role in directing the future of the organization by shaping the performance of its employees. By exercising their influence thoughtfully and carefully, managers can make the difference between an employee's success and failure.