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From The March 2014 Issue

The Importance of Modeling Junior Employees for Future Leadership

Human resource departments are constantly challenged with solving new problems presented by the changing composition of the workplace. This is particularly true this year and for the upcoming years as Baby Boomers, those currently between the ages of 50 and 68, begin to retire. As Baby Boomers exit the workforce, human resource professionals will be forced to fill the leadership roles in their organizations with a younger generation of employees. It is important that human resource departments develop this process now, as leadership development can take a great deal of time. The key to developing an employee into a successful leader is to set realistic expectations for, give feedback to, mentor, and appreciate junior employees.

Setting Expectations

It is crucial that managers set realistic employee expectations for junior employees. While it is generally understood that setting expectations too high is problematic and often results in a manager being disappointed, angered, and frustrated when those expectations are not met, the implications of setting expectations too low are equally important but far less discussed.

Setting expectations too low has been referred to by Jean-François Manzoni, Shell Chaired Professor of human resources and organizational development and Professor of management practice at INSEAD, and Jean-Louis Barsoux, senior research fellow at INSEAD, as the "set-up-to-fail syndrome." According to Manzoni and Barsoux, the syndrome begins when a manager perceives an employee to be mediocre or a poor performer. The manager's perception may or may not be correct; often times it is based on attitudes, values, or social characteristics. Nonetheless, because of his perception, the manager becomes overly critical of the employee, micromanages the employee, and begins to expect less out of him. As a result of the manager's low expectations, the employee begins to doubt his own thinking and ability, and begins to refer all non-routine decisions to his boss. This in turn frustrates the manager and reaffirms his belief that the employee is incapable of performing his job without constant oversight, resulting in the manager again lowering his expectations and this time only assigning the junior employee routine projects. Typically, the cycle ends with the employee becoming unhappy with his job and lack of creative freedom, and he either shuts down or quits. To prevent this cycle, managers must set reasonable expectations for junior employees.

Providing Feedback

Managers must also give balanced feedback. Approximately 60% of employees, particularly younger employees, complain they do not get enough feedback. Managers must give more feedback and also give the right kind of feedback— feedback on what the employee is doing well and what could be



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improved. Advising an employee that his work is bad is not sufficient; employees need to hear exactly what is wrong with their performance so they can focus on fixing it. Further, giving too much positive feedback can also be counterproductive. Positive feedback should only be given when it is earned. Managers who give positive feedback when undeserving confer upon employees an unrealistically high view of their value to the organization. Positive feedback, like negative feedback, should be specific. Outlining for an employee the specific positive aspects of his work allows the employee to continue that particular aspect. Managers should strive to give a mix of both positive feedback, to build confidence and reinforce good behavior, along with negative feedback to encourage reflection and improvement.

Building Confidence

It is also important to encourage and value the opinion of junior employees. Studies show that 60% of employees feel their employer ignores or takes advantage of them. Though people do not readily admit it, they secretly want to be recognized, praised, and considered important. An easy way to show an employee that you value him is by writing a detailed job evaluation, providing an unexpected periodic appraisal, or awarding him a bonus. Younger employees in particular desire bonuses. Managers can build confidence in junior employees by allowing a junior employee to lead a smaller project or by showing an employee that you seek and value his opinion. In order for junior employees to transition into leaders, managers must properly balance positive feedback and constructive criticism, while at the same time allowing junior employees the opportunity to grow and gain independence.

Demonstrating that the future success of their organization depends on the successful transition of junior employees into future leaders, current leadership will be more likely to set realistic expectations, give balanced feedback, and mentor future leaders. Such a result is critical to being prepared for the changing composition of the workplace.

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