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THE CONTINUUM EDGE

INFORMATION FOR LEADERS

Q: One of my employees regularly challenges the team's ideas. Some co-workers call him difficult, to say the least, but his suggestions are often useful. How should I manage this situation?

A: You have a valuable employee whose abrasive communication style is creating tension with co-workers. Addressing the issue directly can help him recognize its impact and make positive changes in how he interacts with others. The key to your success is separating his intellect from his style. You don't want him to believe he is being criticized for being smart. It's the delivery that's problematic. Start by validating his contributions. Then, turn to how his style affects others in ways that you have observed. You must be specific. Saying, "People think you are too abrasive" won't cut it. Examples of behaviors he may display include rolling eyes, sighing heavily or interrupting. Behaviors of affected peers may include visibly shutting down, stopping participation or looking reluctant to share ideas. If your direct coaching does not improve his relationship with peers, consult with Continuum EAP to develop a more formal plan of action.



I'm hiring for a position with a steep learning curve. I've found that an eagerness to learn can matter as much as, or more than, prior experience. How can I spot that quality in a candidate and evaluate whether they're willing to put in the effort to learn this job?

A: Think about the last time you had to learn something unfamiliar at work. You probably asked questions, tried things out, made a few mistakes, and then made adjustments. Spot this type of story when you interview candidates. Ask them about a skill they had to learn quickly: How did they get started? What did they do when they got stuck? Did they use feedback? Many employees will say they are fast learners, but fewer will be able to give specific examples to show how. You might also give every candidate the same realistic job scenario and ask how they would learn the work. Observe how they construct a workable approach, not offer a perfect answer. Even someone eager to learn can get frustrated or feel overwhelmed. Enthusiastic employees may also be hard on themselves, so notice their progress and remind them that Continuum EAP is available if stress or personal concerns are getting in the way.

I believe supervisors would think about praising employees for good work more often if they knew the benefits that derive from it. Can you highlight some of those benefits?

A: When an employee makes a meaningful contribution, recognizing it at a staff meeting or in front of a larger group of people does more than make that person feel good. It has an impact on the entire organization, but many supervisors don't understand why. Public praise has ripple effects. It creates a "wave" of organizational well-being that raises workplace morale. To make the right impact, don't just say, "Great job, Maria." Plan your comments and drill down.

For example, "Everyone, Maria noticed an ongoing customer problem. She gathered the team, brainstormed the solution, and ended this problem we've had for years. So, great job." A supervisor speaking like this gives co-workers something to learn about solving problems. It also says to others that effort gets noticed in this organization. Note that some employees don't like public accolades, so it's OK to ask the worker in advance if you are unsure.

BOTTOM LINE: Praising workers helps employees, the team, and the organization, and it costs nothing.

Q: I assign work, but some employees give me no updates unless I ask. The work may eventually get done, yet I lose time chasing these folks down to find out what's going on. How can I change this without micromanaging, which, of course, every employee hates?

A: Most problems of this nature boil down to clear communication. Think about communication as the culprit in most workplace performance management issues and you'll prevent half of the problems you face throughout the year. Going forward, make updates part of the assignment from the start. Put communication first in your discussion by explaining what a finished result looks like, when you need it, and what decisions depend on its progress. That's three key points of discussion. Agree on a brief update point. For example, "Send me a progress note every Thursday afternoon, even if everything is on track." Some assignments might last for months. In such situations, you must set milestones, but don't let things just float along or give "How's it going?" comments in the hallway.

WITH MILESTONES, TELL EMPLOYEES WHAT YOU WANT:
1) What is finished,
2) What remains, and
3) Whether they need a decision or assistance.

With these fixes, you'll discover higher and faster productivity, less stress, and fewer crises on the job.



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