

What Keeps You Awake at Night?

Where do most of your difficult management problems come from? You know, the ones that keep you up at night, that give you gray hair? The problems that you seem to have to deal with over and over, but that just won't go away?

Is it:

- a) Suppliers
- b) Customers
- c) Government & taxes
- d) The economy
- e) Keeping your business profitable
- f) None of the above

The correct answer is f) None of the above.

Most managers know that most of the most difficult problems that they face punch a time clock every day: They are on your own payroll. That's right, it's your own employees that will cause your hair to turn gray - or to fall out.

Employee performance problems can be classified in two broad categories, and the category will determine the appropriate management response:

The first category is the employee who is unable to perform to your standards. This can happen for a number of legitimate reasons, including unclear work instructions, lack of training or tools, or conflicting instructions. All of these call for your intercession. If the employee needs a new hose, buy the hose. If the air compressor is broken, fix it. If he doesn't know how to do the job, train him. If he's too slow, coach him. Or move him to another position. Eighty percent of being a good employee is attitude, anyway, isn't it? There is always a place in your company for an employee who has a good attitude and tries hard. You can find a place for such a person.

The second category is the employee who is unwilling to perform to your standards. Why would an employee choose to not perform to your standards? Your first answer might be "attitude" or "character." You generally can't change someone else's attitude or character, and you shouldn't try. You aren't their mommy or daddy, and you aren't a psychologist. It's not your place to diagnose a character flaw, much less to try to cure it. Instead, focus on the employee's performance. Always focus on performance.

There is a bigger issue here - how can an employee give you gray hair by consistently, repeatedly, and intentionally not performing to your standards? The answer is: Only if a manager lets him. And if a manager lets an employee do such a thing, it isn't the employee that is the problem - it's the manager. There is a technical term for this. It's called "bad management."

Here's one example. A senior manager came to me in April and asked permission to fire an employee because of an attendance problem. The employee would stroll in anywhere from ten to twenty five minutes late, punch in, change into her uniform on company time, and then stroll to her work place, as if there were no urgency, and as if she had done nothing wrong. About half the time she missed the morning lineup, where daily jobs were assigned, safety concerns were reviewed, etc. I asked the manager how long this had been happening, and he told me "Since last December, when I hired her." I asked why he hadn't written her a warning, and he replied "I tried - I gave her three warnings in two weeks right after I hired her, and it didn't do any good. Can I fire her?"

After three written warnings, the manager gave up on addressing the problem. For five months he watched her stroll in, on her own schedule, and apparently without a care in the world. During that time, he didn't even discuss attendance with her - he found it too stressful. By ignoring the problem, he allowed her to set her own standard for performance. Was she stressed? No, she hadn't a care in the world. How about the manager? He boiled over every morning when she came to work, and fumed. "Why can't she show up on time?" In this situation, the manager was the real problem. He had surrendered his authority on this issue by allowing the problem behavior to continue.

I told him that I wasn't prepared to fire her because of his poor performance. He hadn't managed her effectively. He didn't like that response. After all, he had given her three written warnings, hadn't he?

Management Must Manage. That's not a new concept, but we sometimes forget it. You must manage your employees. That's your job. If you supervise more than a couple of employees, supervision is almost certainly your most important job. And surrender isn't acceptable.

The manager must either a) manage the employee into compliance with company standards, or b) manage the employee out the door. If one tool - written warnings, in this case, doesn't work, try another tool.

I'm not suggesting that you force your employees to comply with unnecessarily rigid standards or that you become a tyrant over petty details. In this case, the manager clearly felt that the employee's performance was substandard. He was asking to fire her, wasn't he? Obviously, punctuality was important to him - and rightfully so, she was missing the morning lineup. But this manager had stopped managing this employee - at least on the issue of punctuality. And he was wasting money, too - the employee was punching in, and then putting on her uniform. This employee was also undermining the manager's authority in front of the other employees.

If one tool doesn't work, try another, and another. Either manage the employee into compliance with your standards, or manage the employee out the door. Surrender is not an option.

There is a management technique called creative stress transfer. As a manager, you have many tools at your disposal to correct poor performance. In difficult situations, choose the one that will effectively transfer your stress to the employee. Here are some things that the manager could have said:

- Is this employee primarily motivated by money? "Gee, I'm sorry, but you won't be eligible for any bonuses or spiffs in any pay period that you are more than five minutes late."
- Is the employee motivated by getting ahead? "I'm sorry, but we are suspending any training subsidies for you until you correct your attendance problem."
- In most states, vacation is not an entitlement. You have a great deal of discretion in granting - or not granting - paid time off. "Because you can't seem to arrive on time, I won't be approving any vacation requests for you for the next six months."
- How about a suspension? Or a transfer to another team, or to another shift? I told this manager to go manage his employee into his standards, or to manage her out the door, and that I wasn't going to fire her because he couldn't manage her properly.