

Ascent Tools & Techniques

Volume 2 Issue 1

WINTER 2000

Management In Real-Life

by Kevin Herring

A friend and former Fortune 500 executive recently told me of an experience that I believe is a tremendous example of integrity and humanity. I hope he will not be offended by my sharing this, but I feel that the life lesson it teaches begs repeating.

My friend was scoping a consulting project at a potential client's operation and observed an employee engaged in work without proper safety protection. With the slightest mistake, the worker was highly vulnerable to loss of limb and possible death. The client was promptly notified of the danger, but merely shrugged his shoulders and moved on. My friend persisted but obtained little satisfaction. Eventually my friend stated his commitment more firmly by refusing to leave the area until the worker was properly secured.

In this situation my friend chose to take a position for change, demonstrating his commitment to his values over possible loss of business and personal gain. We will never know if the worker would have been injured without someone to intervene. But we do know that there are people in the world who make a difference because of their commitment rather than by their position or power.

When we feel resigned and powerless at work, this experience can serve as a powerful reminder that one person can make a positive difference when that person stands for something.

Transition Meetings: As Good as Dinner With the Boss

When a new leader is selected for an organization or work group, along with the change in personnel comes anxiety about expectations, leadership style, personality, and intentions. This anxiety is as real for the new leader as for the affected employees. The result may be employees fearful to act without testing even the most insignificant decisions with the new leader, employees suspending projects until confident of leader support, a leader hesitant to act due to uncertainty of employee reaction, and a leader who may rely on others' advice rather than personal knowledge and understanding. The consequence of all this assaying is misunderstood conversations, encumbered relationships, distractions from organization objectives, and lost productivity.

How can we avoid, or at least minimize the problems of changes in leadership? One way is to organize and carry out a transition meeting. Transition meetings are designed to quickly establish common expectations and commitments, and to minimize confusion and anxiety between leader and employee. They may be held for a small work group receiving a new supervisor, or for an entire organization receiving a new CEO. In either case, the structure is basically the same.

Prior to the new leader's arrival, a facilitator from the human resource department (unless there are substantial issues requiring the assistance of someone outside the organization) requests the employee group generate a list of top five questions they would like to ask the new leader. Most anything is acceptable including questions regarding goals, expertise, experience, leadership style, intentions, etc. These questions are then consolidated and forwarded to the new leader who may consider the questions and develop responses to them.

Likewise, the leader formulates a list of top five questions for the employees which are forwarded to the work group. The employees are then given an opportunity to generate responses to the leader's questions.

Soon after arriving at the new company or work area, the leader meets with the employees to respond to their previously submitted questions and to obtain responses to leader questions. The session usually ends with a general question and answer period. In larger work groups, departments, or organizations, the leader may elect to solicit from and return responses to smaller groups for more individualized dialogue.

By preparing for and managing effective transition meetings, employees and leaders can quickly establish important understandings and relationships, successfully manage short term requirements, and begin preparing the elements necessary for longer-term commitments and outcomes.∞

How to Hire a Million Dollar Employee

Consider a new employee hired at \$50,000 a year. With modest salary increases over ten years the employee will be paid close to \$600,000. Adding an average cost for benefits brings the compensation package up to approximately \$800,000. Tacking on all training costs over the ten year period brings the investment up to nearly one million dollars!

If this million dollar investment was a piece of equipment to be depreciated over a ten-year period, what would be the process for identifying, researching, and selecting the equipment? Would you look it over, peruse the specifications sheet, and analyze your 'gut feel' for a decision? Not likely. Many capital equipment purchases are made after months of research, reference checking, and observing the machine in action at some customer's shop.

Contrast that with your process for hiring the employee in whom you will invest a million dollars. Researchers consistently find that the decision to hire an employee is usually made within the first ten to fifteen minutes of an interview by personality, 'gut feel', or resume alone.

Fortunately there are scientifically validated alternatives for selecting employees. The most common are: **Behavioral Interviews** which ask for examples of past behavior that demonstrate a candidate's typical approach to workplace issues, and, **Assessment Centers** which simulate workplace situations and require candidates to demonstrate how they might address them.

Well designed and executed, behavioral interviewing and assessment centers are sound predictors of the performance of employees at any salary level, and provide an excellent return on investment.∞

Assessment Centers or 360° Feedback?

With the growing popularity of behavioral assessment and selection processes, many managers are puzzled over the differences between 360° feedback and assessment centers. Here we offer considerations of the two methods which influence when and how they should be used.

Assessment centers offer the advantage of providing a realistic simulation of work and an opportunity to observe how an individual manages a variety of situations. Centers can be used for selection as well as for development purposes. They also provide multiple avenues within which an individual may demonstrate competence, therefore assessments often reveal that an individual weak in a particular competency may demonstrate effectiveness by compensating with other competencies, or strengths.

Disadvantages of this method include the time and financial resources required for setting up the centers and running them (although through video taping and the use of external resources, requirements may be reduced considerably).

360° feedback methods are effective in providing multiple perspectives on an individual's performance. Used for development purposes, they can provide tremendous insight into an individual's actual behavior, and corresponding development goals can be linked to reward systems. Feedback processes can be relatively inexpensive and simple to administer depending on the technology used.

Due to its very nature, 360° feedback can not be used for new-hire selection, and according to research, it should never be used directly for any employment or compensation decisions. Furthermore, without proper training assessors may fail to provide meaningful feedback to learners.

With proper application, however, either or both methods can be powerful tools for competency assessment, development, or employee selection.∞

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Ascent Tools & Techniques is published by Ascent Management Consulting, a Tucson-based firm specializing in business results through the design of effective human engagement systems and tools. We can be reached at 520-742-7300, by fax at 520-742-9236, by mail at 330 E. Glenhurst Dr., Oro Valley, AZ 85704, or by email at:

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