How t o Help Your Employees Avoid Failure

Acommon adage states that people don't fail organizations, organizations fail people. The reality is that for most, failure is a direct consequence of the work environment, and has little to do with the capabilities of the individual.

Can you afford to let your people fail? Definitely not. With the uncertain global economic climate and its effect on the chemical industry, no organization can afford to lose talented employees. The cost of hiring and training are too great. You can, and must, do everything within your power to ensure that the people you hire are given every opportunity to be as successful as they can be.

Why People Fail

Typically, employee failure is evaluated by reviewing symptoms. "John's just not meeting his goals." "Mary isn't delivering the results expected." Far too many managers ignore the root causes of failure. Why didn't John meet his goals? Why is Mary producing below expectations? Many falsely assume that failure is simply the result of a person's bad attitude or inability to do the job. But according to recent research, the majority of people fail for other reasons.

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"People issues" overwhelmingly engender employee failure. While Mary and John may seem incompetent, it's much more likely that some organizational problem is to blame. Something in the environment is bringing out the worst in these employees. Maybe it's a bad manager. Perhaps it's intolerable co-workers. Or maybe you're not hiring the right people—people whose personalities mesh with your culture. Senior management and HR personnel must take responsibility for creating a culture of success. They must identify and eradicate the causes of failure—before failure occurs.

Preventing Conflict with the Boss

The single greatest cause of employee failure is supervisor conflict. John loses respect for his manager. Mary feels she's unappreciated. Typically, conflict with the boss results from one of several causes: lack of trust, lack of direction, perceived lack of fairness, loss of mutual respect, or unrealistic expectations. And once the relationship deteriorates, so will the results. So what can you do?

1. Avoid it
Supervisor/subordinate conflicts are best avoided at the outset. Strive to build compatible teams. For example, don't assign an individual needing a lot of hand holding under a supervisor who's overstressed and has too many responsibilities to manage. Personality testing may be the best tool to ensure compatibility. Start with your hiring process. Use behavioral assessment to spotlight incompatibilities before they occur. When necessary, reassign individuals by verifying that the style of the new supervisor will work well with the transferred individual.

2. Discover It
Unfortunately, only in an ideal world could all personality conflicts be prevented. In the real world, they will occur. The challenge is to identify and rectify conflicts before problems escalate (and results deteriorate). How can senior managers become aware of looming disasters? By getting candid feedback using tools like 360° reviews. Unlike a traditional review, where a manager provides feedback to a subordinate, a 360° review gathers input from the manager, the subordinate, and the subordinate's co-workers. The aim is to develop a truer picture of the working relationship—vital feedback that can provide early warning to upper management.

3. Fix It
A pervasive culture enables supervisors to confront issues with employees rather than avoid them. But developing a culture of candor is not easy. Employees are distrustful of honesty—they know the messenger is often the one who gets the blame. And they may not believe anyone will listen to their ideas. Candor starts at the top. Senior executives must demonstrate the value of being honest. They must prove that candid feedback will be heard, that it will be acted upon, and most importantly that honest input is safe when given and appreciated.

One word of caution: Discovering conflict may create more problems than it solves—if the company does not provide appropriate training to its managers. Managing a team of diverse individuals does not come naturally for most. Supervisors must be taught to recognize the unique personality styles of others and be shown how to most effectively manage each style. Training in subjects such

as conflict management and diversity have proven invaluable as people from widely different backgrounds continue to be drawn into the workforce.

Preventing Conflict with Peers

Building compatible teams, fostering a culture of candor, implementing 360° reviews, and providing conflict and diversity training will go a long way to ensure that conflicts with the boss are avoided. They can also help eliminate conflicts between employees.

No one can deliver their best results in an environment where they don't get along with their peers. Peer conflict increases attitude problems, office tension, and absenteeism. It typically will impact not only individual performance, but also customer service and corporate morale. In today's world, where cross-functional teams thrive, the opportunity for peer conflict is greater than ever.

We routinely force individuals with inherently different styles to work together. We mix engineering, sales, marketing, and R&D providing little more than a common goal. While such diversity can greatly aid the creative process, it also increases the likelihood of conflict—and raises the risk of failure. Proactive management can put a stop to a bad situation before it snowballs. Just as in dealing with conflicts with the boss, the objective is to avoid peer conflict or discover and fix it before failure occurs. Once again, a combination of personality assessment, candor, feedback, and training for both managers and employees will greatly aid in preventing peer conflict. And of course if all else fails, mixing up the teams is an option.

Preventing Conflict in Values, Ethics and Style

You can teach skills. You can help people gain experience. But you can't change an individual's personality. Forcing a square peg into a round hole does nothing more than frustrate the peg and damage the hole. To prevent conflicts in values, ethics and behavioral style, there is only one solution—hire right! Placing a c loc k-watc her in a dedicated and highly focused team will probably create a great deal of dissension. Turning an engineer into a salesman might just

drive him and the other sales people crazy. And both situations may culminate in turnover. Hiring the wrong people is a sentence to failure.

Preventing Skill Deficiency

Some people fail because they truly can't do the job. This may be the result of poor hiring procedures, inadequate training, or people being promoted beyond their level of competency. The best way to prevent failure due to skill deficiency is to verify hat you have the right person for the task—whether you're hiring, reorganizing or promoting.

In hiring, don't rely on resumes to determine skills. Test those skills in a manner closely related to how they will be applied in the work place. Consider computer-based testing and in-box simulations. Test problem solving capabilities. A very bright candidate might not have exactly the right experience, but he or she stands a better chance of quickly mastering previously unfamiliar tasks. Proper training is also critical. No one can succeed without the right tools, and training is one of the most essential. In today's hectic work environment, training can often be overlooked. New hires are brought in to help out, but nobody has the time to teach them all they need to know to be truly effective. Whether through formal training, apprenticeships, or on-the-job training, make sure that your employees are taught the skills they need to succeed.

Reduce Failure, Hire Better

Many people who fail at their jobs probably shouldn't have been given those jobs in the first place. The best way to reduce failure is to make better hiring decisions. Hire more than skills and experience: hire people who will be a good fit with their manager, their co-workers, and your corporate culture. Assess behavioral traits to determine a better fit. A structured interview process designed with the guidance of HR professionals, supervisors, and employees who are already top performers in the relevant positions can offer a much clearer forecast of future performance. Such a process will ensure consistency and fairness, improve the quality of information gathering, and will greatly reduce the chances of error. Hiring right gives people the best chance to succeed in the workplace.