

Managerial feedback motivates employees

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Everyone knows the damage that can occur to a change project if an influential manager leaves. So what does a manager do that is so important? One important but seldom discussed aspect of a manager's work is building a relationship with employees through frequent feedback.

Nearly fifty years ago, Frederick Herzberg suggested that not all aspects of the workplace are equally important in terms of their effect on employees' performance. His research demonstrated that people have two kinds of needs at work: 'hygiene' needs, such as for fair wages and a reasonable physical working environment and 'motivation' needs, such as for recognition, responsibility and advancement. Satisfying hygiene needs has little long-term effect, he found, whereas motivators have a continuing and long-term effect on performance. Employees want responsibility and a relationship with the organisation's customers – everyone wants to feel that they are doing something for someone else. They also need to know how they are doing, so frequent and effective feedback from a trusted manager can motivate staff and thus improve their performance. The quality of the relationship between the manager and the individual employee could therefore be one of the keys to the successful workplace of the future.

But in Sweden, individuals in organisations such as Volvo, ABB and Eriksson, which do attach importance to employee involvement, spend just one hour a year, or 0.05% of their working time, talking to their manager about their performance and their developmental needs. The situation is much the same in the UK. Apart from that single hour, most people only speak to their manager when there is a problem.

In a work group of 20, two will always be speaking to their manager, three will sometimes speak to him or her, but for 15, it will only be some kind of problem which gets the two parties together. Since the problem may be with the individual's performance, this is not a sound basis for a happy and productive working relationship and is scarcely balanced by the one-hour feedback session each year.

When it is suggested that managers should spend more time talking to their staff, their response is often that they don't have enough time. But if a manager spoke to each of 20 subordinates once a month, this would only take up 10% of their working time. For 40 subordinates, a discussion with each one every other month would still only amount to 10% of working time. And what else should managers be doing if not producing motivated staff?

Frequent feedback can be the 'gearbox' of the organisation since it can drive improvement. Its advantages are:

- it builds better relationships with staff
- the manager has greater knowledge of what is going on in the workplace
- small problems stay small and are easily solved
- it costs almost nothing

Unfortunately, very few organisations reward managers for talking to their staff. When Swedish managers were asked in 2002 what they were rewarded for, they identified the following behaviours:

- being verbal and visible
- keeping to their budget
- making no mistakes
- observing company rules and procedures
- maintaining law and order in the workplace.

Evidence

Evidence of the effectiveness of managers who give frequent feedback recently emerged from a study conducted in StoraEnso, a Swedish paper mill with 800 employees. Unusually, the company doctor decided to study people who were healthy – defined as those who in three years of employment had two years without sick leave – rather than those who were sick. The study was prompted by the high rate of absence in Sweden, particularly in the public sector, which is a cause for concern. The doctor found that the most important factor in encouraging people to go to work was a manager who gave frequent feedback. Managers were followed as they moved from shift to shift, department to department and from plant to plant, and they always had this effect on their subordinates. Some workers had long-term serious health problems, but they came to work much more with this kind of manager.

Per-Olov Bergström was a steelworker for many years, became a full-time official for the Swedish steelworkers' union, and now works for LO, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation. He was project manager for the influential 'The rewarding work organisation', a tool for analysing the current state of work organisation and how it can be improved. This is a summary of a presentation he gave at a meeting of UKWON on 10 March 2003.

Queries regarding 'The rewarding work organisation' (REWO), available in English, should be addressed to dga@lo.se.