

Keep Your Performers Close and Get the Others Off Your Team... Promptly

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Our experiences with COVID-19 demonstrated something that your grandmother probably already told you -- a problem ignored is not a problem solved. While procrastination can sometimes be a good thing, like Brussels sprouts that go bad and then you don't have to eat them, it can also set you up for failure.

Consistently, beginning in March, employment attorneys heard about the problems managers were having with various members of their teams - "I know I should have dealt with this months ago but..." or, "I really wish I would have dealt with this before COVID-19 hit," demonstrating the additional stress that poorly functioning teams had on simply getting the job done.

Ostrich approach

Many take the ostrich approach hoping a problem will simply go away if they don't pay any attention to it. Unfortunately, problems with teams and how teams are structured rarely magically disappear. We know it can be hard to focus on team structure and dynamics for a variety of reasons:

- It can be difficult to speak with others about how their communication or workstyles impacts a team, especially when these elements are not easily quantified
- Upper-level managers might duck difficult discussions because they are afraid of hurting people's feelings or simply because they don't have time

However, the problem is a leaky faucet that not only drives you crazy with the drip, drip, drip but also loses you hundreds of gallons of water per year. The same can be true of your team when you lose quality employees, momentum, and good ideas to problems that you simply choose not to resolve.

Failed promotions

You have a great employee. He or she is wonderful, fabulous, you love them, and then you promote them out of their skillset. All of a sudden, they fail to perform, and the team starts to suffer. The issue to review here is whether this promotion was truly out of the anticipated skillset of the employee. In other words, is this something that we may be able to fix with training, or is this fundamental to how this person interacts as a team lead or manager? If there is potential that additional training may address the performance concerns, you need to do that sooner rather than later before bad habits get ingrained and the team itself is demoralized.

Discipline avoidance

Employees may be relatively scary for a wide array of reasons, personality, fear of litigation, or fear of the amount of

disruption the employee will cause when counseled. Employers frequently say, “I try not to discipline him because he pouts for weeks on end and everything is an uproar when we try to do it.”

When the employment attorney asks whether he/she improved performance, a typical response is, “for a day or two but really not consistently.” These problems require direct, specific, and fairly straightforward communication, potentially a performance improvement plan and if consistent and sustained improvement is not seen, further disciplinary action including termination. Work with your attorney to manage litigation risk and timing but also remember that if *you* are scared of an employee, what about their subordinates and fellow co-employees? How disruptive will keeping them be to the team?

No time

Yep, we get it. Nobody has time. Nobody wants the drama. Nobody wants to deal with it, and everyone has something better to do. However, how much more time will it take when you have to rehire an entire team because everybody else walked out the door and how much time does it take every day to deal with the minor irritations, the poor performance, or the problems amongst your team members?

Small workforce pool

It’s hard to hire good people. Here in Iowa, we have a lot of jobs that might remain unfilled for a significant period of time, especially in rural areas. But like the prior categories, a bad employee only places burdens on other employees to pick up the slack and do the work and creates significant emotional stress in the workplace.

Teamwork

Other issues can sometimes result when each individual member of the team is fine, but they don’t work together well or you are missing crucial elements. COVID-19 certainly impacted employers across the board. If your team didn’t have a problem solver and someone who would think strategically and long term, you are likely to have suffered significant issues given the fast pace of business response to the pandemic as well as shifting regulations and requirements. Teams require a balance of skills and talents before the crisis hits.

Expectations

Be transparent with expectations, goals, and what it takes to be a success. Employees can’t meet a standard you won’t tell them about. Accidentally sabotaging your team because you are too busy or worried about who gets credit hurts everyone, including you.

The Big Picture

Much of the COVID post-game assessment focuses on the issues of being kind, giving grace, and taking a deep breath. All wonderful advice - but kindness includes being clear about performance expectations and skillsets. No one likes to come to work every day knowing they are failing - you do your employees, yourself, and your company a service by providing clear feedback and expectations.

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