Kill Your Business by Ignoring this Non-Urgent Issue

By Rebecca Morgan, CSP, CMC

Another key employee has just quit. When asked why, he states that, among other reasons, his manager was hard to get along with, gave conflicting priorities, and was unavailable for clarification. Additionally, he could be moody, and snap when a staff member made a minor mistake. This isn't the first time you've heard reports like this, not only about this manager, but about several others. You've given them feedback, but they don't seem to change.

That's the least of your worries right now. You've got several big proposals out, and you need to be involved with closing them. You just won several new contracts that require your adding head count, as your people are now stretched too thin. You want to refinance a loan so you can get a better rate and add some much-needed equipment. So developing your managers isn't at the top of the priority list right now.

But it should be.

According to a recent Gallup poll, the top reason employees leave is because of their boss. How much is turnover costing you? How long and how much money does it cost to recruit new people, train them and get them productive? Longer than you'd like.

How long and how much money would it take to fine-tune the skills of your present managers? A lot less than putting out personnel fires, loss of productivity from unhappy workers, and the headaches these cost your senior team and you. What if your managers were better skilled at working with their people so there were fewer problems, higher output, and everyone could focus on doing their jobs, rather than backbiting?

In my 24 years in the people-development business, I've noticed an interesting phenomenon. CEOs and senior staff put off the non-urgent, yet important, task of developing their key talent. I see it much like losing weight. If someone is overweight, it is bothersome. He knows he should do something about it, it's not healthy, and he doesn't look and feel as good as he'd like. Yet it takes a plan, some effort, time and usually some money. It's just easier to live with it, even if he has trouble climbing stairs, finding attractive clothes, feeling good about himself. "It's a lot of trouble," he might say. Or "I know I need a plan, but it has to be one that fits for me, and I don't have time right now to figure it out."

And if he does nothing it will kill him.

Same with developing your key talent.

If you do nothing, the dysfunctionality of your people will kill your business.

So what to do? Here are some ideas (a plan!) to get you started:

1. Understand the seriousness and ramifications of your doing nothing. Yes, you can continue to skate by for a while. But how long have you been skating by already? Are you close to a major meltdown and don't know it? When it comes, it will take much more time and money – and headaches -- than you imagined.

2. Realize it will take some time and effort on your part to start an effective program. Sustainable progress is not about sending managers to one-day courses, which creates no change. This, like the weight loss plan, needs to be an ongoing effort, not just an every once in a while activity when you can fit it in. It needs to be a well-thought-through plan, with regular learning activities.

3. Work with an internal or external professional learning consultant who understands how long-term change happens and designs a plan that will ensure measurable results. People learn differently, and may need different learning vehicles for various scenarios. For example, if needing a brush up on interviewing new hires, a book or eLearning may be sufficient. If a manager needs to be better at giving feedback, role playing may be the best solution, whether that's one-on-one with a mentor/coach, or in a class. If there's an issue with not delegating, then a weekly accountability partner may do the trick. The point is to develop a plan with some options beyond a short-term training class to help instill new habits.

4. Develop accountabilities. All learners need to have accountability to be the most effective. In our weight loss metaphor, the programs that are most effective helping people lose weight are those that have a regular weigh in. That's accountability! Your people need to be accountable to whomever they report to. The accountability is not just for participating in the learning activity ("Yes, I went to class." "Yes, I had my coaching session."). They need to be accountable for taking action on their learnings. It's too easy to attend a learning activity and not change one thing. The learner needs to be accountable for the needed changes, and that accountability needs to be to their boss, not the instructor or HR Department.

5. Start something, even if the plan is not fully flushed out. Yes, it would be great if all of the pieces of the puzzle were in place before you begin. Yet, if 80%-90% of the plan is in place, begin with gusto! Development is a dynamic animal. You will be tweaking and modifying it as you go along. Your people will come up with ideas of what they want added and changed to make it even more effective for them. Be flexible.

You may be saying "My people aren't dysfunctional." Great! But do they have the skills to step up to the next level of responsibility? Are they regularly growing and learning how to be better at their job? The same Gallup poll found that one of the reasons top employees leave is if they felt they were not learning and growing, and that no one took an interest in their development.

Don't let the lack of developing your key talent drive away your best people and kill your business. Don't put it off any longer. A crisis may be right around the corner.

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