



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

STOP PUNISHING YOUR BEST EMPLOYEES

Introduction

Imagine the following scenario in a typical Malaysian corporate organisation: a high performing employee is busy rushing through some complicated project work at the office. Her workmates aren't very helpful. They lackadaisically stand around, chatting and watching her. The employee goes about her work oblivious of her workmates, as she rushes to meet the deadline. Her manager then rushes into the office and immediately informs the office that the Chief Executive Officer wants a very important report by 12 pm the next day. Guess who gets to do the job? Yes, most of the time, the manager will go to the high performing employee although he is aware that the individual concerned is still busy trying to finish the project work.

Why is this so? Why do we 'punish' high performing employees by giving them 'more' or else 'difficult' work? Why do we overload some individuals with a lot of work, while we allow some of our 'poor' subordinates to have lots of 'free' time, just because they cannot be relied upon?

The answer is simple. Managers will always go to people whom they can rely on during a 'crisis'. At the same time, managers want to look good in front of their superiors and what better way than to hand over good quality work, which can be done by their high performing subordinates. In that context, most productive employees are viewed as an asset who will free the manager to concentrate on other work.

'Punishing' Good Employees

Some Malaysian managers also find that the current work environment prevents them from adopting a management style where work is distributed evenly. They are so inundated with work activities on a daily basis, that they tend to rely on good performers on getting the job done. They do not want to waste time, correcting or coaching a subordinate. They would rather get it right the first time or else spend minimal time on a subordinate whom they know will do a good job. Hence these managers couldn't care less about fairness. Now, all this is fine, except that this tendency can frustrate top performers especially if they feel that others in their department don't work as hard but still get rewarded.

Another situation where good performers are 'punished' is when a company conducts a voluntary separation scheme (VSS). In a VSS situation, a company will have the option to reject or else accept an individual's VSS request. Usually, the company will accept requests by 'under performing' staff. On the other hand, it is most certain that the company will want to keep their good performers and hence will reject their VSS requests. In this scenario, a poor performer gets rewarded with a lump sum payment and he will not have to work for the period paid for and can use that time to look for another job. On the other hand, the high performer is punished by being denied the lump sum payment and the opportunity to look for another job. This is especially so when he knows that he is very marketable, due to his efficiency and effectiveness.

To make matters worse, the high performers are usually not rewarded accordingly. This is very common in most Malaysian organisations. To illustrate this phenomenon, you can do the following. Take the salaries of your best and worst performers in a particular rank or scale, and then compare their salaries. It is most certain that you will find that there is very little difference between them. Or else you might even find that the worst performers can be earning more than the best performers. When asked, most managers and organisations will answer with the following reasons:

- a. "What can we do, we are just abiding by the salary scale".
- b. "There is nothing we can do about this. The worst performer has been with us for a long time and hence has a higher salary as compared to the good performer due to the annual salary reviews."
- c. "If we do not give salary adjustments and bonuses to our problem employees, they will become even worse".

In the cases above, the systems and processes are at fault, and if that is so, then they should be discarded. A salary scale and system that does not reward performers or else one that rewards seniority rather than performance will not assist in improving a staff's efficiency and effectiveness. Managers must also take responsibility for allowing the above situation to continue. They should modify faulty systems rather than use them as an excuse. A likely scenario in such a situation is that the performers will leave, and as we are all aware, the cost of replacing them will be huge, and with no guarantee that the replacements will be as capable.

So how do we solve this problem? The obvious answer is that the performers should be rewarded and the poor performers identified, and coached to be better and if this does not work, then there will be no alternative but to separate. Ironically, most managers spend more time with poor performers, as compared to top performers. This is due to poor performers being slow to learn or else having to be coached constantly in certain skills. There has to be a line drawn though, otherwise unproductive time is spent on someone who cannot learn and improve at the expense of spending time with top performers to improve even further. Concentrating only on the needs of poor performers can also cause resentment.

Steps to re-direct focus on poor performers

Managers who spend too much time with less productive employees can take several steps to redirect their focus.

One of the first steps is to clearly communicate your work and behaviour expectations to them. You cannot simply tell an employee, "I want you to do a good job" and expect them to perform. You must communicate what you expect. You yourself must be clear as to your expectations, otherwise the employee gets a 'fuzzy' picture and this will lead to problems. It is of no use saying, "I want sales to go up", because that is not a clear expectation. It would be better if you tell them, "I want sales to go up by 20%".

Another system that must be in place for the above to function is for the organisation to have good job descriptions and standards, output goals and measurement devices, and regular feedback and review. This will ensure that performance is monitored year round and the results used to distribute rewards. The system will also be transparent so that everyone will be aware of expectations, and measurement standards.

Another good way to improve performance and to distribute rewards fairly is by using the 360-degree appraisal system. The system works on the fact that superiors, peers and subordinates appraise us in key competencies and in teamwork. This system is excellent as it is difficult to argue with feedback given by people around you. If those working around you appraise you as a poor performer, then this will have to be accepted. In a conventional appraisal system however, there can be arguments of biasness or misplaced perceptions due to the appraisal being done by only one person.

Another way to reward performance is by switching from a time based salary scale to a skill-based or performance-based salary system. This will force managers to pay attention to the performance of their employees. Part of this system may include team-based incentives along with individual incentives. When a group of employees has a collective stake in meeting goals, high performers can help manage the average ones. When one individual isn't meeting the expectations of the group members, they quickly inform him or her of the shortcoming. Peer pressure can be a very effective motivator, if handled effectively by the team and its leader.

Conclusion

Ultimately, managers must deal firmly with poor performers. Use the carrot initially by ensuring that they are coached and trained, outlining expectations clearly and then holding them accountable for meeting goals and standards. If they are unable to meet these standards then they are either not rewarded or else are asked to leave. This is something that I find lacking in most Malaysian organisations. Due perhaps to cultural reasons, organisations are reluctant to take decisive action against poor performers. Managers tend to have the attitude that they will just have to 'live with the problem', and hence spend more time with the problem employees.

Ultimately, when the poor performer gets all the attention, inclusive the rewards, then the good performer may turn around and say, "I think I can play this game too", and starts to allow standards and behaviour to deteriorate. When this happens, it is only the organisations, which will be on the losing end.