

## Ignite Newsletter April 2008

# Talent Management: Set People Up for Success

What is the biggest mistake leaders make when working with others? Inappropriate communication according to ongoing research by The Ken Blanchard Companies. In open-ended questioning, 1,400 survey respondents identified that too often leaders either don't communicate, overcommunicate, communicate inappropriately through outbursts, anger, or blaming, or simply don't communicate clearly. In addition, leaders may fail to communicate the vision in a way that is meaningful, assuming that direct reports intuitively understand the direction of the company and their role in making this happen.

Providing inappropriate direction was the second most highly cited leadership mistake. Giving direction without involving others in the process, not seeking the feedback of others, and not empowering direct reports can cause frustration and lack of focus. In addition, using a generalized approach to direction rather than considering the person, task, and situation was cited as a key mistake made by leaders.

Failure to address these two important issues negatively impacts the performance and productivity of the people working in the organization. That's because performance planning and performance coaching are two key aspects of a successful talent management system. If you want the people in your organization to meet or exceed their annual goals, be sure that you are setting them up for success by establishing clear goals up front and then providing the direction and support they need to achieve those goals throughout the year.

### The Role of Performance Review

Performance review is another important aspect of an effective talent management system. This is where a manager and direct report sit down and assess the direct report's performance over time. This aspect of performance management holds employees accountable for achieving agreed-upon goals and behavior. Just make sure that performance review doesn't become the focus of talent management in your organization.

Ken Blanchard often shares one of his experiences as a college professor to illustrate the problems with this mindset. (Ken taught for ten years before moving into the business world.)

As a teacher, Ken was always in trouble. What drove the faculty crazy more than anything was that at the beginning of every semester he gave his students the final exam. When the faculty found out about this, they called him in and asked, "What are you doing?"

Ken said, "I thought we were supposed to teach these students."

The faculty said, "You are, but don't give them the final exam ahead of time!"

Ken said, "Not only will I give them the final exam ahead of time, what do you think I'll do throughout the semester? I'll teach them the answers so that when they get to the final exam, they'll get A's."

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In Ken's mind, helping students to get an "A" was more important than evaluating their performance. He was more concerned with making sure they learned the material than ranking them along a normal distribution curve for grading purposes.

What's more important in your organization?

If it's evaluation, creating a forced ranking to determine reward, recognition, and promotion opportunities probably makes some sense. If it's helping everyone in the organization achieve higher levels of performance, you may want to consider Ken Blanchard's approach. In our experience, giving people the final exam ahead of time by setting clear goals and then following up with direction and support throughout the year gives employees what they need to succeed.

### **Don't Mark My Paper—Help Me Get an A**

One senior executive who subscribes to the belief that performance coaching deserves more emphasis than performance evaluation is Garry Ridge, President of WD-40.

At Ridge's company, performance planning sets the stage by letting people know exactly what's expected of them. This means that clear goals are set and reviewed, and people know exactly what they will be tested on at the end of the year. Once goals are set, managers are asked to step up and provide performance coaching.

Ridge calls this philosophy "Don't Mark My Paper—Help Me Get an A" and he has adopted it as a major theme in his company. He is so emphatic about this concept that he fired a poor performer's manager rather than the poor performer when he found out that the manager had done nothing to help that person get an A.

Teaching direct reports the answers is what performance coaching is all about. Giving people the same exam during the performance review that you gave them at the beginning of the year helps them win—to get a good evaluation.

Not all managers are like Garry Ridge. Many still believe you need to use a normal distribution curve that grades a few people high, a few people low, and the rest average.

What do you believe? How is it impacting performance in your organization?

### **Leading People to Be Their Best**

Leadership that emphasizes judgment, criticism, and evaluation is a thing of the past. Today, people are looking for leaders who can provide the direction, support, and encouragement they need to be their best.

A truly effective talent management system has three parts.

1. The first is performance planning. All good performance starts with clear goals. Clarifying goals involves making sure that people understand two things: first, what they are being asked to do—their areas of accountability—and second, what good performance looks like—the performance standards by which they will be evaluated.

2. The second aspect of an effective talent management system is performance coaching. At this stage, managers work for their people, praising progress and redirecting inappropriate performance.

3. The third and final aspect of an effective talent management system is the performance review. This is where a person's performance over the course of a year is summed up. If steps one and two have been done properly, the year-end performance review will just be a review of what has already been discussed. There will be no surprises. Instead, managers and direct reports will be reviewing and celebrating the tasks they have already been working on.

Talent management should be an ongoing process that takes place throughout the year. Help your people get A's by making sure you put as much focus on setting clear goals and coaching day-to-day performance as you do on performance review and evaluation.

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