

Helping Star Performers Shine

[Save to myBoK](#)

by Beth Hjort, RHIA

Cost containment and reduced employee benefits in the healthcare industry, combined with sustained low unemployment rates, make retaining star employees a bigger challenge than ever. Estimated turnover costs can be between \$10,000 and \$40,000 per individual. And then there's the ripple effect: position vacancies increase pressure on current employees to work harder, which affects their job satisfaction. Companies that assess non-financial success elements find that when employee satisfaction is high, customer satisfaction is high. We can deduce that the reverse is also true.

For the manager of a health information department whose workload and responsibilities are sizable, team synergy and accomplishments are critical. Turnover can affect more than one department. And if we overlook individual employees in efforts to accomplish organizational goals, we lose sight of an important part of the picture.

What Kind of Manager Are You?

Employees working in HIM departments have one thing in common: they are part of a team working toward common goals. However, the similarities may end there. Each employee is a unique individual with unique learning processes and inspirations. Each possesses a wide range of personal skills, demonstrates varying levels of confidence, and responds to different degrees of challenge. To be a good leader among such diversity, how can a manager take into account all of the differences to foster the best learning environment and create the best work world for each employee?

Managers can't know all things and be sensitive to every employee nuance and changing need. They can, however, pave the way for staff to blossom individually while achieving group goals, therefore benefiting the employee, the manager, and the organization.

Chances are, you contribute to employee development through existing educational and total quality management programs. These programs generally ensure that problems are addressed and groups receive appropriate training in chosen areas. Individual employee needs require an approach that is about addressing the perceived work environment. It's about freedom to express oneself within parameters of minimal guidance and maximum safety.

Take a look at your personal management style by considering the following questions:

Do I encourage and create an environment of trust? When broad direction is given with a desired outcome and advisories about contributing factors, it leaves room for personal expression and flexibility in the journey. When we leave the process open-ended, we are expressing our trust in employees. This also means giving them enough room to make mistakes.

What is my tolerance for mistakes? When things go wrong, there's an opportunity to deepen the trust. Wrong turns are seldom intentional and evaluating contributing factors together will aid employees in developing decision-making skills. Here's a chance for a manager to coach, rather than direct, and for an employee to gain knowledge and confidence. Together, you might conclude how similar situations could be handled differently in the future and whether others might gain from the lesson. If the situation is appropriate to share with others, it's less threatening if the employee tells the story.

Are my expectations flexible and realistic? It's important to gauge your staff's confidence level and readiness for challenge. Some employees might be more comfortable working in tandem until confidence builds, while others are natural mentors and enjoy teaching. Uniting these employees will allow the mentor to use his or her innate skills while encouraging the less confident employee. For others, working alone is best and projects of increasing challenge will allow them to stretch.

Am I available and responsive? In most learning curves, greater energy is expended in the beginning. Employees may have more questions at start-up and will in time exercise increased confidence and independence. Usually, they will use other resources and contacts instead of approaching you for every direction. However, when they come to you, be available with the

attitude that they are important, their work is important, and you have time for them. E-mail might be the least obtrusive method of contact they have with you, so it's important to give it the same priority as other projects of greater status or exposure. Your employees' enthusiasm for a job done well and efficiently can wane if they can't go forward without your input.

Do I know what training individuals need? You choose who should learn about new legislation and who needs focused training for an unfamiliar task. Yet when it comes to confidence in daily tasks, who knows better than the employee what skills need enhancement? Make this discussion part of the comfortable environment you have created. Addressing skill levels is not about revealing weaknesses; it's about being strong enough to ask for what's needed. You might find that several staff members have similar requests and combined training would optimize the trainer's time or could justify the purchase of training tapes or ASP (application service provider) programs with long-term value.

Are communications regarding personnel issues confidential? If you find correction or re-evaluation of a problem necessary, do it in private, honestly and gently. This is another part of the safe environment you have created for your employees. While honoring confidentiality, be sensitive to the concerns of coworkers and address them in a general way, if appropriate.

Am I giving enough praise? It's easy to turn our attention to the squeaky wheel and overlook the entourage helping to carry the load. Praise is one area where confidentiality doesn't apply. In many cases, existing avenues, such as department meetings, e-mail announcements, memos for employees files with management copied, and organizational newsletters can be used.

Do I encourage independent conflict resolution? Personal growth can occur during organizational low points as well as high points. Create an environment of expectation for individual responsibility for building relationships and fostering partnerships. Let employees sharpen their communication and group dynamics skills by resolving conflicts on their own.

Would I feel appreciated if I worked for me? Remember to acknowledge input and give feedback. Employees deserve to be heard whether issues are perceived or real. However, managers don't have time to investigate every suggestion or criticism, so those situations may present opportunities for the initiator to get involved in finding the answer or resolving the problem. When ideas are implemented, give due credit. Further, the response to questions or plans cannot always be "yes," but employees will honor a "no" much more when they understand the reason and believe the request was pursued to the highest decision-making level. If you can't provide an answer, explain what you are doing to find out and when response might be forthcoming.

What message does a new employee hear? A first impression of a workplace can be lasting. Immediately define the workplace personality and the element of personal expression. An employee who knows what is expected of him or her and clearly understands parameters will respond with greater trust to risk-taking opportunities than one who questions outcome tolerance. Make sure employees understand that asking questions is an indication of concern for a job done properly and is not viewed as weakness.

Cultivating and Retaining the Best

Keeping and developing star performers means helping each individual to attain his or her very best level of performance. That includes you, the manager, who can't be all things and in all places. A "power over" attitude should evolve to a "power to" philosophy: power to get things done through people and power to use individual uniqueness to its fullest potential.

Loosening the reigns can lead to happier, self-actualized employees who go beyond the expected and free up leadership time. When managers coach instead of directing, they might be surprised by latent talents emerging.

References

- Dasenbrook, Norman C. and Michael D. Mastroianni. *Harnessing the Power of Conflict*. Rockford, IL: Crysard Press, 1997.
- Maxey, Cindi. "Ten Ways to De-Motivate Your Staff." *Forum* 84, no. 10 (2000).
- "Increasing Employee Satisfaction." *Performance Unlimited*. Available at www.performance-unlimited.com/satisfy.htm.
- Schoenfelt, Suzanne. "Developing Personal Effectiveness: Practical Tips to Your Skills." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no. 7 (1998).

Beth Hjort is an AHIMA practice manager. She can be reached at <mailto:beth.hjort@ahima.org>.

Article citation:

Hjort, Beth. "Helping Star Performers Shine." *Journal of AHIMA* 72, no.2 (2001): 73-75.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.