

Don't Shoot The Staff - Together you can achieve high performance

A few years ago, Karen Pryor, an animal trainer turned learning consultant, wrote an intriguing book titled "Don't Shoot the Dog!" Karen recommends eight methods for getting rid of unwanted behaviour in pets and people. Shooting the dog is the most drastic and it's permanent.

Sometimes it's a bit the same with our staff when they just don't seem to care about performance the way we want them to. If, as managers, we are tired and overworked, our thoughts may turn briefly to the possibility of firing them. Until we remember those unfair dismissal laws. We're caught between a rock and a hard place - too much effort to fire them and a lot of effort to "retrain" them.

The key is make performance a key focus of our regular conversations, not just an awkward annual event, so here are some basic guidelines that will help you.

Let staff know what's required

Some owners and managers tend to think that good staff should know what good performance is. Great staff do have an uncanny knack of knowing exactly what's required, but most staff can't read the boss's mind and need to be told what's expected.

The manager's responsibility is to make sure that the everyone understands clearly what good performance looks, sounds and feels like. To suit all learning styles, write, tell and show staff what's required and keep repeating it, regularly.

One business owner tells people exactly how she wants them to operate, but nothing is written down. Observing her for a few hours the problem was obvious, not dumb staff, but information overload. Too many detailed instructions. She hated writing things down, so she agreed to ask the staff to write down the instructions and she learned to give instructions at a slower speed. She also agreed not to criticise the person's performance if there were parts of the process she hadn't explained. It is her responsibility to ensure the instructions are comprehensive.

Let them know why it's required

Make a list of all your requirements and expectations of employees. Then take the list and for each item, ask "why is this necessary to the business?" If it's not necessary to the business it may be a personal value.

For example, if you expect employees to arrive on time every day, ask "why is it necessary for staff to be in at a certain time?" If the business advertises certain opening hours, then requiring staff to work certain hours is a valid standard.

If it's more for your comfort, so you know they are at work, or if its something you value personally as demonstrating commitment, you need to consider the impact of your expectation on staff who don't value timeliness. Consider using flexibility as a negotiating point. For example offer flexible work hours as a reward those who consistently meet their client deadlines.

Provide specific & respectful feedback

Feedback is the food of champions. Staff need regular, specific feedback if they are to improve their performance. Keep reminding staff in see, hear, feel language what results you want to see.

Collect specific examples of success or gaps on a regular basis and feed them back as soon as possible. Rather than say "your grammar isn't up to scratch", at an annual discussion, have evidence to be able to say "Jim, over the last week, I've seen these three pieces of your

work with spelling and grammatical errors in them. Let's talk about how you can produce work that has zero errors".

Even better, speak to Jim the first time you notice an error.

If specific is half the answer, respect is the other half. People like to know what they can do to improve not what's wrong. Managers often give feedback like this: "you are very enthusiastic but you don't handle the details well".

Instead try saying "your client manner is very enthusiastic and if you applied your enthusiasm to double checking the details on the reports before you send them off, you're total performance would be excellent". It tells them how they can improve rather than where they went wrong.

Reward good performance

Finally, make sure you reward high performance - with positive comments, written compliments and symbolic or practical rewards. And rather than try and read their minds, find out what is and isn't valuable to them, so they don't fire off an angry salvo about being unappreciated. Or worse, leave permanently.

Your challenge

Take one idea initially, turn it into an action you can take daily and put it into practice for 21 days – until it starts to become a habit. Then move on to the next idea, whilst maintaining the first action and within 3 months you are likely to have much better performance from your people and no need to bring the big guns out – except in a positive way.