

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS



Ability to motivate and adapt essential

Managers who deliver consistent performance and get the best out of every member of the team are moving in the right direction

IT'S A SIMPLE fact of business life that some executives keep going from strength to strength, while others get stuck halfway up the career ladder and fail to fulfil their true potential. As we explained in last week's article, those who succeed share four key skills: the ability to establish strong relationships, build and lead teams, produce results and adapt quickly to changing demands.

This week, we will focus on the latter two categories and show how, by enhancing the relevant competencies, it is possible to keep your career on track and moving in the right direction.

Organisations want to see results and they promote managers who get the job done. Therefore, to get noticed, executives must deliver consistent, at times exceptional, performance and be ready to take responsibility. As they rise through the ranks, it is no longer enough for them to perform well as individuals. They must know how to get the best out of every member of their team and be able to get the required results without having hands-on control. Many people find this difficult. They prefer to be in touch with the nuts and bolts of the business and have difficulty getting things done just by exerting influence and motivating others. However, the following strategies can be applied to good effect:

Formalise performance criteria
Make sure that everyone on your team understands how performance is measured. There should be clear and specific criteria, which are reviewed from time to time to take account of changes in the business environment. Also, be in no doubt how your own performance is measured and ensure any targets are realistic and achievable. With clear criteria, it is possible to evaluate the resources needed to succeed and to anticipate potential obstacles.

Remember that the annual performance appraisal is only one part of the process. You should be measuring progress on an ongoing basis and noting comments from senior managers, peers, direct reports and customers. Most importantly, whatever performance criteria you set, link them to the company's overall goals and mission.

Listen to feedback
One of the best ways to improve is by asking for feedback about your own performance or your department's on a regular basis. Be willing to accept the good with

WEEK 6 | Strategies for keeping your career on track

the bad and ask openly where things could be done better. This does not have to be too formal. For example, after a meeting, just turn to a colleague and ask: "How do you think that went?" Even if the comments are off the cuff, you will learn something.

Sometimes, the most valuable feedback about work issues comes from friends and family. Therefore, ask for their advice and learn from the different perspectives they can give.

The basic aim in listening to feedback is to help you reach your goals. Therefore, be certain in your own mind what these are.

Take responsibility
Once you have determined what you must do to succeed, assess your skills, knowledge and general competencies.

Pinpoint personal strengths and weaknesses and relate them to the demands of your job. Then start to gauge your own performance. If your skills are not up to scratch in one area – perhaps negotiating or presenting – talk to your manager or the HR department and arrange the necessary training. More senior managers can always consider hiring an executive coach.

Every up and coming manager needs support. It may be someone to bounce ideas off, provide encouragement, or to point out when things are starting to slip. Find people to rely on and let them help you to develop new skills. When the chance comes to tackle a new assignment, do not refuse it. Instead, remember that every challenge is an opportunity to learn and improve.

Set clear goals
Putting in long hours and becoming obsessive about the details does not mean you are doing a good job. In fact, the secrets to success are to define a clear goal, set intermediate priorities, get organised, and avoid the temptation to procrastinate. The best approach is to do the most important things first, while understanding what you do fits in with the broader goals of the organisation.

When deciding what should come first, it is useful to apply one version of the 80/20 rule: it takes 20 per cent of your effort to accomplish 80 per cent of your goals. Determine where your efforts are best applied and set priorities accordingly.

Maintain focus

It is important to develop new skills, but first you will be judged on your job performance. Therefore, your primary focus should be to accomplish each day's objectives and to ensure your team does the same. Complete tasks and submit reports on time, tie up loose ends and develop a reputation for efficiency.

By maintaining high standards in this respect, you will help the overall organisation and find you have more time to think strategically. Someone whose department runs smoothly and is always dependable is far more likely to catch the eye of senior management.

In the fast-paced world of modern business, adaptability to cope with change has become an indispensable skill for any leader. A manager who can adapt is able to remain in control in even the toughest situations and will have the self-confidence to handle unfamiliar problems resulting from re-engineering, off-shoring, globalisation or new systems. Adaptability goes hand in hand with learning from mistakes, something which all of us can do. If you have trouble adapting, the following strategies will help:

Avoid conflict

Sometimes it seems that a new boss wants change for the sake of change. Accustomed practices are turned upside down and workplace routines are altered for no obvious reason. In these circumstances, the older hands may resist or, after a while, openly object. The best approach, though, is to accept that some things will change and then to establish what the new boss expects from you and vice versa. A good relationship with the boss counts for a lot. Keep communicating, stay "on task" and show that you are part of the team, even if you do not agree with all the new initiatives. If things get difficult, it can be tempting to go over the head of your boss and make a formal complaint. However, before doing this, remember how hierarchies work.

Identify problem areas
Many executives run into trouble when they switch from a technical role to one with broader managerial responsibilities. Their daily tasks are no longer objective,

specific and easily quantifiable. The new management role is likely to entail more subjectivity and deal with ambiguities, personalities and varying opinions. If you expect to make such a shift and have certain misgivings, clearly identify the skills you will need in the new role and start to develop them.

This type of change is difficult, even for high achievers with all the right qualifications. They know, though, that to make it to the top, they have to step outside their comfort zone.

Learn the culture

Organisations may have similar business models but in practice they all work differently. Therefore, to get ahead, you must know how your company operates internally when meeting challenges and formulating strategy. This is the key to getting a fair hearing and getting things done.

To an outsider or a new recruit, some of the processes may seem mystifying or outdated. They are sure to change in due course, but, in the meantime, it is usually best to learn how the organisation works and fall into alignment, rather than trying to instigate superficial changes.

Seek opinions

If you are struggling in a new role, isolate a particular problem and concentrate on fixing that. Look at what is going wrong in the context of the job and then ask people both inside and outside the company for feedback. Their opinions may not match your own, but the whole point of the exercise is to get alternative perspectives.

After careful consideration, implement the best plan and monitor the general reaction and outcome.

Develop self-awareness

We might be reluctant to admit it, but most of us experience strong emotions when faced with change at work. This can adversely affect our moods and level of performance.

When too much seems to be changing all at the same time, take a step back to review your thoughts and feelings about the job or the company. Look for the positive things; that will help you remain flexible and ready to accept future change.

Contributed by Craig Chappelow and Jean Britain Leslie of the Centre for Creative Leadership, an educational institution dedicated to leadership training and research worldwide

HRtrends

Upcoming HR 'Oscars' a first for Hong Kong

Debut awards open to all companies regardless of size, and aim to give a fair and equal chance to all

Andrea Li

ORGANISATIONS THAT wish to highlight human resources initiatives that have had a positive impact on their business should take note of a comprehensive human resources awards programme to be launched soon in Hong Kong.

The organisers – the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management and the *South China Morning Post* – hope that The People Management Awards 2006 will eventually become the "Oscars of HR".

The architects of the awards have drawn on similar initiatives in place in Britain and Australia.

The contest aims to give a fair and equal chance to every type of organisation, whether they are small to medium-sized businesses, non-governmental organisations or multinationals.

The competition is divided into three categories, based on the size of the company. The judging criteria will be the same for all three categories.

"We deliberately designed the competition in such a way that companies will be competing against companies of a similar size to themselves," said Carrie Chau Lik-yau, general manager of the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management.

She said that small companies might not have the complexity of their larger counterparts, but the impact of their initiatives was just as valuable to their scale of operations as a large company's project.

In the competition, size is considered relative and is not the most important issue. The nature of the project is what is most crucial.

The application criteria had been made deliberately broad to accommodate projects of all types, she said.

But whether directly or indirectly, all such initiatives should by nature have some positive influence on the company's bottom line, not necessarily in straight dollar saving terms but also by improving areas such as productivity, efficiency and staff retention, Ms Chau said.

Such elements, in their own way, can have a positive impact on the business.

According to Ms Chau, any company's human resources project that has brought about an impact on the business is considered good enough to apply.

Such initiatives may range from achieving a new work culture, introducing new work practices or changing the attitude of employees by empowering them to deliver customised services, to equipping them with new skills in keeping with the company's changing business needs.

Other relevant scenarios include helping the organisation to attract better talent; reducing turnover and turning difficult business situations around; better engaging employees so they feel prouder of, and more loyal to, their organisation; helping staff achieve a better work-life balance and applying a better IT system to improve operations.

A panel of more than 10 judges, comprising human resources professionals and academics, will review the applications before coming up with a shortlist of candidates – ideally three companies in each category.

The selected companies will then give a presentation of their success story to the panel and answer questions before a final decision is made on the winners.

HKIHIRM / SCMP PEOPLE MANAGEMENT AWARDS 2006

- Small enterprises 50 people or less
- Medium enterprises 51 to 500 people
- Large enterprise 501 people or more
- Online applications www.hkihrm.org/award
- Deadline for entry submission September 9, 2006
- Further inquiries Joanna Lam at 2881 5113 or 2837 3820

QUICKfixes

THE ROLE OF HR IN PLANNING FOR DISASTER RECOVERY

The outbreak of Sars in 2003 and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States are proof that no country or company is immune from disaster. Threats can include tsunamis, earthquakes, bombing attacks, an office fire or flooding.

Companies need to be prepared and plan at least for the more common disaster recovery scenarios, as disasters have a critical impact on employees' lives and their work.

A well implemented plan can make a critical difference in how quickly employees are able to resume work. The quality and quantity of their work will be directly affected.

Support from management is the most important step in creating a successful disaster recovery plan. To obtain the necessary resources and time required from each area of the organisation, senior management has to understand the initiative and the risks involved.

Human resource issues are often overlooked. The company needs to lay down a policy on whether it will continue to pay staff during a prolonged disruption and what other assistance, such as temporary shelter

and financial aid, should be provided to employees to help them recover from personal losses caused by the disaster.

The HR department should work with top management to assess the types of risk the firm faces, taking into account key variables, and prepare to deal with these emergencies.

In the event that the office is destroyed, HR should keep contact details of staff and their next of kin at an alternative location and ensure these are kept up to date. It may also be worthwhile to set up a toll-free number for staff to keep in contact or to leave pre-recorded messages on a special telephone number.

Copies of personnel records for all staff should be backed up and kept off-site. Many companies keep hard copies of contracts, performance reviews and annual leave, which could alleviate disruption in the case of a disaster.

Obviously, the more clearly a company is able to illustrate its case by quantifying it with figures and facts, the more convincing it will be.

But Ms Chau stressed that such quantifiers depended on the type of initiative being put forward.

Participating companies will benefit from the competition by sharing human resources successes with other corporations, and the winners of each category and the overall



Carrie Chau says the awards criteria is broad enough to accommodate projects of all sizes.

competition winner will be able to further build on their brands through the generated publicity.

"The process will also motivate the organisations' human resources teams to facilitate alignment of the teams' activities to the broader business goals," Ms Chau said.

"There is the added pride and inspiration among employees that comes from being recognised by their peers."

Mr Lai said: "In the long term, we hope that it will not just be the award itself that will be important, but that this will become a platform to showcase best practices of HR management."

Article contributed by Nardia Munt on behalf of Hudson, which delivers specialised professional recruiting, outsourcing and human resource solutions worldwide