HANDLING PROcrastinators

Poor supervisory style isn’t always the culprit behind the slowpoke. It often pays to point out the facts—and the problems caused to others.

By Susan C. Bakos
Some workers routinely don't finish their assigned tasks by deadlines or they cause others to assume a share of their work loads because they're always “running behind.” They are the procrastinators who cause a lot of problems. Supervisors often do part of their work to make up the slack, or heap extra jobs on the faster workers. Others resent the procrastinator who receives these special favors.

Handling the procrastinator is a difficult disciplinary problem. This person usually does thorough and accurate work, clocks in on time, and has no negative attitudes. For those reasons, job termination is the last resort which most supervisors try to avoid. But they, or someone else, does the extra work created by those slowpokes.

One midwestern contractor was caught in this trap. He was determined to do something positive to change the procrastinator’s behavior. “You’ll never turn a slow worker into a quick one,” he warns. “But it is possible to push the procrastinator toward a suitable norm with gentle pressure.”

First, he advises, examine your own approach to order giving. Are you too timid when issuing deadlines? Or is your tone slightly bullying and thus intimidating the cautious worker? Are those missed deadlines realistic and necessary—or arbitrary exercises of power?

While many workers respond positively to the strong supervisor, some may feel threatened. Most people will complete tasks whether the supervisor is timid or not, but a few will use that timidity as an excuse for a mental vacation. Poor supervisory style can affect some workers and turn them into procrastinators, either afraid of tackling jobs and failing, or simply not concerned enough to bother.

When the supervisory style can be eliminated as a cause, the procrastinating behavior is the worker’s own style. First, call a private conference to explain the importance of deadlines made. If the worker genuinely doesn’t understand or concur with your thinking about deadlines, this talk may help by stating the issue. “Persuasion is sometimes just a matter of convincing the slowpoke there’s a good reason behind deadlines,” says one supervisor.

Even if this discussion doesn’t lead to a quick resolution of the problem, it has made your stand clear. Up to this point, the slow worker was probably praised for a job well done, even when it wasn’t finished on time. The missed deadline may not have been mentioned at all. And the worker may not even have been aware that other people are handling some of his responsibilities because of his slowness.

Now he knows these things. Don’t let the deadline issue become a power struggle between the two of you. Point out the unfairness his work habits create for others. If he is promotion-oriented, he will surely realize the slow work habits have to be changed.

You’ve examined attitudes, yours and his, and explained important time factors. Now, be careful in making future assignments. Can you find tasks more compatible with this person’s working style? Is it possible to give some open-ended or long-range assignments that won’t make him feel pushed? Quite often, the slow workers...
are well suited psychologically to handling those routine tasks which other employees find tedious.

When you must issue a hard deadline, do it carefully. Ask the worker how much time he needs to complete this task, then tell him how much time you can reasonably allow—and why. If the two dates are greatly different, attempt a compromise. Advises a supervisor who’s been handling slow-pokes for twenty years, “Be sure you get a verbal agreement from the employee about the deadline. Workers who’ve agreed to a deadline usually make it. They regard the deadline as a promise made rather than an order given.”

When the worker has had a chance to participate in setting the date, he is going to be more agreeable. The discussion gave him the chance to raise doubts or considerations the supervisor might have overlooked. The supervisor also had the opportunity to explain those outside time pressures on him.

Some supervisors don’t share this kind of information with workers, then wonder why they have trouble gaining cooperation.

Once the deadline has been set, be firm about it. Don’t remind the worker about the project due date the way you would remind a child. Have faith in his ability to keep the promise. By putting the responsibility on him, you show trust and confidence.

Even the slowest workers can respond positively to reasonable deadlines if they’re handled carefully. Remember the following points:

**Supervisor’s Checklist**

If deadlines aren’t being met, analyze your own approach to assignment-giving.

Is your tone neither too timid nor too harsh?

Are assignments given with respect to workers’ abilities and working habits?

Do you share outside information about time pressures with workers?

Do you enlist their cooperation in setting their own deadlines?

Do you refrain from nagging them about deadlines as they work?