Managing People Problems

Want Higher Field Productivity? Just Follow These Seven Personnel Strategies.

By Joe Ancona

As contractors, we realize how important it is to sell the job, to have a good cost accounting system, to avoid legal problems, to estimate jobs realistically and to provide a safe working environment. We all provide some form of direction or management affecting these elements. You and/or your leadership should be performing these tasks routinely while managing your people problems. Each person is an individual and is unique in his or her behavior. We can only direct this individualism into the behavioral patterns that will best accomplish our business tasks.

There are seven key strategies that will enable you to manage employees more effectively:

1. Being aware of changes impacting the job.
2. Understanding employee values.
3. Dealing with difficult (and not so difficult) employees.
4. Being selective in mixing work groups.
5. Minimizing wasted time on the job.
6. Communicating goals.
7. Using the 98 percent-two percent system.

Changes impacting the job...

The changes impacting the construction industry range from the fluctuating economy to government and union regulations, to new materials and equipment, to social changes, and to the individualism of people in the workforce. We must better understand and accept change in order to cope with today’s challenges if we are to survive. One of the major challenges is understanding people’s values.

Understanding values...

Since today’s workforce includes all kinds of people, a successful leader has to understand employees both as individuals and as group members. Some leaders believe that all people should be treated the same, with no exceptions. All employees should be treated fairly and impartially. Different approaches should be used to allow for employee individualism.

Management must understand what motivates an employee. People are unique in the way they see the world. Exceptions should be made when situations dictate. Treating employees as individuals with different needs, abilities and goals is the mark of a good leader.

Successful leaders accept that employees behave as they see the world from their points of view and needs, and not from how we necessarily see the situation. Deeply felt personal concepts determine behavior, which helps explain why people act so differently and why we must learn to deal with all employees.

There are basic characteristics that “difficult” employees exhibit. We
often recognize these characteristics as stubbornness or laziness, just to name a few. A difficult employee may reveal one or more of these characteristics. Generally, what really happens in life is not half as important as what we think and believe happens. This is not necessarily a rational process. It is more often a function of subconscious needs and concerns, and elements that distort what is really going on.

For example, an employee might say or think, “I am a person who needs praise and does not receive it working for you. My despondency, defensiveness or distress may be hard for you to understand. The problem is clearly mine when I interpret your lack of praise as being criticism and a sign of my failure.” This demonstrates the power of thought and ideas that lead to distortion of reality. Our responses to life are more often a function of our perception of reality than reality itself.

Sickness is one legitimate way we can excuse ourselves from failure. Many individuals have various mechanisms (real or otherwise) of escaping their perception of reality. Anxiety, depression, defensiveness, introvertedness and extrovertedness are but a few examples of escapes. An effective leader learns to recognize these escape avenues and deals positively with the problems creating them.

Selection of work groups . . .

When we think of the different individuals and their needs and abilities, one wonders how we get any jobs done. Handling employees as individuals is a challenge, and dealing with them as group members is even more complex.

The formal group is selected and structured. Everyone knows where they belong and who has been assigned as foremen or supervisor. It is a well-defined work unit. The informal group mixture is as important to the success of the job as the skills of the group members. Informal leaders emerge. All groups are comprised of both formal and informal factions and those factions must be dealt with and considered when forming groups for jobs. This informal group can establish norms, or standards that can be high or low. The informal leader who
emerges can be an asset or a liability depending on how the formal leader deals with him or her.

An effective leader recognizes this process, accepts it and tries to fully maximize the group’s cohesiveness when forming groups. He or she also considers:

1. Not to form groups that consist of all previous foremen. Status problems may emerge.
2. If individuals have strong ethnic or racial biases (remember values).
3. If the employees generally are compatible.
4. If the employees have the right skills for the job.
5. If participation by all group members is necessary to approach the task.
6. If the power of the group, or lack of it, will affect the job.

A leader with a management perspective does not fight informal groups, but tries to learn and understand them and takes advantage of their constructive benefits. Obviously, we do not always have the luxury of total flexibility in forming work groups, but we can plan our employee mix in order to minimize wasted time on jobs.

**Minimizing wasted time . . .**

There are many causes for wasted time on the job and they include both people and events. We have previously discussed the values of employees, the changes impacting our industry and the considerations we have to make in the selection of work groups. Poor planning is the common thread that weaves through all of these problems.

Most experts agree advance planning is a must, but is underrated by most. Leaders consider it unproductive work. Leaders with a true management perspective do not make this mistake. Advance planning, 15 minutes before or after the workday, is conducive to success. Planning is simply thinking in advance. It establishes what is to be
done and by whom, where and how. These factors require organized and systematic thinking and should be put in writing. Poor planning causes problems for all employees. It causes costly emergencies, equipment breakdown, employee shortages, job delays, greater production costs and labor unrest, just to name a few. Planning processes are unique and there are no recipes for it. Planning does not guarantee success, but it certainly leads to it.

Planning is the main way a leader achieves his central goal of “not to do the work himself but to arrange matters so others can accomplish the goals of the firm with their approval and support.”

Effective leaders establish an environment for the employee to do his/her thing. An important principle for leaders to understand is that these employee needs are entirely within a leader’s control. It is a difficult job because different satisfiers turns each worker on, and a variety of satisfiers are to be met. Expectations should be communicated and can be motivators. If you expect mediocrity you will get mediocrity. Use the 98 percent-2 percent system.

The 98%/2% system . . .

The 98 percent-2 percent system suggests that overall job duties consist of 100 percent effort, ninety eight percent of our results are positive and the other two percent is probably unacceptable work. Unfortunately, most of us hear about and react to the two percent unacceptable work. This approach is used today by many insecure leaders.

Concentrate on the positive aspects of a worker’s performance. The 98 percent-2 percent system is suggested for motivating subordinates:

1. Know your employees.
2. Accentuate the positive (strengths) in employees.
3. Establish a motivational climate that develops team spirit, persuades rather than demands, encourages participation, shares in the rewards and the two (2) percent.

Effective management of people’s problems can be accomplished by your knowledge of employee individualism. Your use of this knowledge will aid you in building strongly motivated employees. You are the determining factor to successful management.