

Why managers keep eyes shut tightly

By the time George missed the big deadline, his manager Juliana had already gone through several months of pretending there was no problem. Her long-standing, positive relationship with George prevented her from addressing the decline in the quality of his work, his lateness and withdrawal. Now, faced with a problem to which she couldn't turn a blind eye, Juliana cringed at the idea of having to take action.

Many managers fall into the "procrastination trap" and avoid dealing with performance problems. Unfortunately, HR professionals who support them are often slow to diagnose the problem and provide timely assistance.

A manager falls into the procrastination trap for a variety of reasons: He knows the employee is struggling with difficult personal circumstances; he has a personal relationship with the employee; he fears he'll compromise the employee's future; he worries about damaging the relationship with the employee; or he is paralyzed by the fear of handling the conversation in an unskilled way.

Meanwhile, things on the ground get worse. The performance further deteriorates, other team members begin questioning the manager's leadership and customer service suffers.

If I'm good, I shouldn't be bad

Most of us think of ourselves as good, decent human beings — and managers are no exception. The possibility of confronting performance issues triggers a debilitating, unconscious conflict. Somewhere deep within, the matter gets translated into: "If I can do this to a fellow human being, it means I'm a bad person." Once this happens, anxiety and avoidance kick in.

Like Juliana, managers will unconsciously invent a host of excuses that justify not dealing with a performance problem. These excuses alleviate their discomfort and allow them to maintain their internal sense of decency. They ignore changes in an employee's performance while telling themselves "it will pass" or "it isn't really all that serious." Or they persuade themselves they have more



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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pressing priorities.

Beyond procrastination

Let's face it, dealing with performance issues is right up there on any manager's list of "most despised tasks." And it can be pretty lonely out in the battlefield. True, most organizations offer clear processes for progressive discipline. But they fall short on providing leaders with essential strategies for assessing and intervening before things get really bad. Managers are left to figure it out on their own, with scarce tools. A good management training program can provide a solid framework, skills and confidence that help managers stop procrastinating. In addition to training, HR professionals can provide support by offering managers the following guidance:

Action is more helpful than procrastination. Become aware of the paradox inherent in the fact your procrastination is not helpful to the employee. If you don't act and things become worse, you might eventually have to take more drastic measures. By intervening early, you are respectfully providing the person with the opportunity to self-correct.

Record: Take detailed notes pertaining to the problem behaviours. These notes will allow you to see reality more clearly and help you determine if, how and when to intervene. Make sure to record observations (things a video camera would capture), not some form of unqualified diagnosis. For example, don't record, "George was defensive." Instead, record, "When

Mary inquired about a late report, George yelled at her." This way, when you raise the issue with the employee, you're equipped with real data, rather than a "diagnosis" that might induce a defensive response and make you an even worse procrastinator. After all, if you tell George he had been "aggressive and unco-operative," you can pretty much bet he will become aggressive and unco-operative before your very eyes.

Consult: Get another person's perspective. In addition to HR, people such as your own manager or a seasoned colleague will readily share their experience and help you gain clarity and confidence.

Acquire skills: Dealing with performance issues is part of a leader's developmental journey. You need to be good at this, no matter how uncomfortable it may seem. Read, role-play with someone or take courses — do whatever works for you.

Have a solid plan for the conversation with the employee. At the very least, your plan should include the following:

- clarity about the desired outcome (Such as "Arrive at an agreed-upon plan that will get George's performance back on track.")
- a clear structure you can rely on when things become tense or you feel your own anxiety rising
- a detailed list of the performance problems, articulated in video camera terms
- familiarity with the resources available to assist the person
- a willingness to listen and truly engage in dialogue.

Taking early action prevents things from getting worse and empowers a shift from a position of reactive management to one of supportive leadership. This will prevent a lot of angst on all fronts and allow for issues to be resolved smoothly and effectively.

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