

Want to keep your best people?

Try coaching as an effective leadership style

By Charlie Lang

“Would you stay if I give you a 10 percent pay raise?” Tom asked Karin.

“No. First, it’s not about the money and second, I already made a commitment to my new employer. Sorry!” she replied.

“So, what is it about then?” he asked.

“I just feel that I don’t grow anymore here. I don’t feel challenged and so I made up my mind to move on,” she said.

Tom was devastated. Karin was one of his best accountants and he knew it would be very difficult to replace her with someone equally qualified and experienced. Also, he appreciated her drive to get things done.

This is a common scenario in the Hong Kong accounting profession, where firms and businesses face staff shortages and struggle to retain quality employees.

Tom kept wondering what went wrong. All this time he thought that everything was in order and that Karin was happy working for him.

“She rarely complained and focused on doing the tasks I assigned to her.” That, however, is often exactly the problem, particularly with high performers.

You wonder why

What makes people really good in their



ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIO RIVERA III

jobs? To answer this, we must first see what it takes to perform well.

While the company must provide basic conditions such as tools and opportunities, the employee is primarily responsible for developing his or her own ability and willingness to perform well.

In most cases it is easier to develop employees’ ability than their willingness to do their best. But during job selection, the focus is on the candidate’s ability rather than his or her willingness to perform, which is understandable as willingness is much harder to assess.

Top performers combine a high ability with a high willingness to perform. Willingness will deteriorate if he or she doesn’t feel challenged and recognized for his or her high achievements.

Since high performers usually don’t feel comfortable with a decrease in willingness, they tend to look for other opportunities that promise to reignite their desire for doing an excellent job.

So what should Tom have done differently to make Karin stay?

One of the key concepts in coaching is ownership, which means that the coaching manager encourages

subordinates to accept more responsibility and choose what tasks to do and how to do them. This is important when working with highly capable staff.

Instead of assigning tasks, Tom should have used active listening and questioning skills to let Karin come up with new ideas and encouraged her to suggest ways of doing things.

Tom should have supported her in thinking through the process in the best possible way and owning her ideas and their execution.

When managers start coaching, they often feel they are losing power and control as their role shifts from telling others what to do to supporting subordinates in their growth through more ownership. Also, they frequently fear that their subordinates don't see them as the leader anymore.

These fears can be overcome by clarifying with employees that the role of a manager is more like a facilitator for their progress. Over time, the manager's job becomes much more enjoyable because there is no need for time-consuming and often annoying tight controls.

Of course, giving ownership to subordinates requires that they are capable in that area. If their capability is low, it is the responsibility of the manager to give adequate training to them so that coaching becomes possible soon.

Managers who coach their people reap considerable benefits:

- Higher employee performance through higher employee engagement.
- Cost savings through reduced attrition.
- Higher satisfaction from supporting their people's growth.

Does coaching take more time than a more directive leadership style? Yes and no. In the first months of coaching, the manager must be ready to spend more time to coach subordinates to take ownership. However, in the longer term, the manager saves time because the need for control and tight follow-up reduces considerably due to an employee's higher engagement. Also, if their employees stay longer, it means less disruption and less time for recruitment and training of new people.

Applying coaching as a leadership style is challenging since it is a skill most people don't naturally possess, but it's certainly worth the effort. If Tom had coached Karin, she might have stayed longer with his company.

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