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Building a Performance Partnership

**Ideas & Strategies for Creating & Sustaining
Strong Partnerships with Your Staff**



RCI White Paper



Building a Performance Partnership

One of the most important benefits that successful businesses provide their employees is a supportive working relationship. When employees are treated as partners by the business, they are more likely to serve the long-term needs of the business. When working relationships are productive, employees tend to bring quality to their work and treat customers well. Investing in this productive performance partnership is fundamental to developing employee commitment to the business.

As a business owner or manager, you want performance commitment from your employees, not just compliance. While compliance may get the job done in the short-term, employee commitment is what enables quality service and profitability. Building a partnership and strengthening employee commitment to your business and customers, however, doesn't happen by accident. To ensure good results, you must invest in creating a strong and productive relationship with your employees. As with other employee benefits, this investment will pay for itself over the long term.

What is required to build a performance partnership? How can you strengthen employee commitment to customers and your business? Here are our ideas for investing in a strong employee/employer relationship.

Share your great expectations. Employees need to know what you expect before they can meet these expectations. While it seems like an obvious requirement, it is surprising how often employees are forced to figure things out on their own. When you clarify expectations for both *outcomes* and *processes*, employees are able to work with greater clarity and focus. The partnership is strong when employees know the target of their work. Communicating your expectations also has a side benefit of raising employee satisfaction. People's job satisfaction rises when they are clear about what they need to do (processes) and what they should be working towards (outcomes).

Encourage employees to set their own performance goals. After you've defined what you expect, give employees the opportunity to offer their reactions to these expectations. Commitment to a goal is strengthened when people feel that it's *their* goal, not one that's simply imposed upon them. A strong performance partnership—and good employee relations—depend upon employees feeling some control over their own future.

Identify how you can support their success. Being clear about what you expect and involving employees in setting their goals are good places to begin in building a solid relationship with your employees. Ensuring that they are successful in achieving these goals is the critical next step. Meet with your employees to find out

what each needs to be successful in the job. One employee may need training in how to better use a computer, another a complete review of the company's product line, while another needs weekly feedback sessions with you. Although the list of possible employee performance support needs is endless, you can only find out what your people *actually* need by asking.

You may not be able (or want) to fulfill every need. That's okay. Let people know what you can and can't do. In the process of asking, however, you have gained a better understanding of your employees' views of the company and their roles within it—and you now know what they believe they need to be successful. The next step of providing the needed support, training, or equipment becomes self-evident.

Find out what turns your employees on. An effective performance partnership depends upon each party both giving and getting something of value. You provide resources and support and, in return, you get an employee's time, energy, and ideas. Defining your expectations up front helps ensure that what you *get* from an employee is what your company needs. Defining what employees want in return for their labor is another critical part of building their commitment to your company.

Some people simply want a healthy paycheck. Others, however, want more than just a salary. They may want opportunities to lead others. They may want a chance at future ownership. They may want the chance to make a difference in people's lives. Or they simply may want a job that fits in around their family life and needs. As with employees' support needs, the list of their possible wants is also endless. But you won't know what excites your employees unless you ask. Find out what turns each employee on and then you'll know if you can help flip the switch—or if the employee's wants aren't a good match for what you are willing or able to offer.

Hold frequent and informal discussions about performance. One of the biggest mistakes business owners or managers make is assuming that after goals are set and expectations known, their job is to stand back and let things happen. While giving people freedom to perform, solve problems, and serve the customer are critical to employees feeling ownership for their jobs, they also need a continuing connection with you. A strong performance partnership results from an ongoing relationship with employees. Performance isn't a once or twice a year event. It's a daily occurrence.

Your job as an owner or manager is to keep the lines of communication open. The free-flow of information between you and your employees enables you to know what's working and what's *not* working in the employee's worklife. It also enables you to provide additional support and direction that the employee may require. Plus, it gives you another perspective on what's happening with your customers. So, instead of waiting until the annual performance assessment, use the frequent discussions you

have with each of your employees to ensure that you both understand each others' expectations, needs, problems, frustrations, and "home runs."

Provide recognition and rewards for great performance. When people do good work, your job is to find a way to recognize it. When they do *great* work, you must find a way to *celebrate* it. This doesn't mean pulling out your checkbook every time you see good or great performance. It does mean that you need to follow through on your promises—the things you told your employees you would provide for people who do great work. Rewarding great employee performance demonstrates your investment in the performance partnership. Rewarding great performance is also an investment in your company's future. When people directly benefit from doing good work for you, your customers and company directly benefit too.

When things go wrong, explore *cause* not blame. The performance partnership is most challenged when an employee is having performance problems. Responding to performance problems is perhaps the most important thing you can do as a manager so focus on understanding the *cause* of the problem, not on blaming the employee. When you shift your attention away from fixing blame to discovering the cause, the employee will be less defensive. Less defensiveness, in turn, leads to the employee taking a more active part in understanding and owning the solution to the problem.

There are many employee benefits to which business owners and managers must attend. Many of the tangible ones—such as health insurance, 401(k), sick leave, vacation time—are essential for attracting and keeping great employees. The often intangible benefit of positive working relationships, however, is just as important. Without a good relationship with your employees, you don't have a performance partnership. And without a performance partnership, you can't serve your customers well.

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