

# Workplace Enhancement Notes

A Tip Sheet for Organizational Leaders & Managers

Volume 7, Issue 1

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## Managing the Problem Employee

**Y**ou know that you need to do something differently. You're at your wit's end. You've tried just about everything—heart-to-heart discussions, praising what he or she does do well (hoping to motivate him or her), taking work away from your employee, threatening to cut his or her salary, even praying that the problem just goes away—but still, the performance problem goes on. And it continues to take up more and more of your time.

The challenge of managing your problem employee is a good example of the well-known principle of quality improvement called the “80/20 rule.” This rule suggests that 80% of your people management energy is consumed by the 20% of your employees who aren't performing at the level you think they are capable. How do you escape the 80/20 rule when it comes to managing your problem performers? The answer is in changing the way that *you* perform as a manager. Here are a few suggestions to get you using a different approach to turning the problem performer's work around.



### A Different Approach

**Identify the performance problem and the desired performance goal.** One of the biggest mistakes people make when managing a problem performer is that they often fail to clearly and carefully define the performance problem. Rather than thinking in abstract generalities (such as “He has a poor attitude”), the first step in confronting a performance problem is being very clear about what isn't working. This means being able to describe in behavioral

*(Continued on page 2)*



### Read this Issue to . . .

- Understand how to manage the problem performer
- Assess the effectiveness of your teams
- Identify the benefits of conducting an employee attitude survey

## Assessing the Effectiveness of Your Teams

**T**here is a lot of hype and hoopla about teams. For the past ten years or so many organizations have been quick to embrace the idea of teams—even if they weren't sure what they were trying to accomplish or how they should accomplish it. As a result, in recent years thousands of teams have been created in companies large and small. Unfortunately, for many of these teams, the results have been much less than desired or expected.

It's not that teams aren't able to live up to people's expectations. In fact, when a team is designed and managed well, it almost always *exceeds* the expectations set before it by others. Achieving this level of true team performance—the oft-cited *synergistic effect*—is, however, usually only possible if the team pays some attention to the four key performance dimensions that enable *great* team performance. These four team dimensions are: *customer focus*, *performance management*, *team processes*, and *team member relationships*. Let's look at these four dimensions and what team members should attend to within each.

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## Problem Employee, contd.

terms or in specific performance outcomes the performance that is unacceptable and *why* it is unacceptable. This, of course, is only fair. If we want to see a change in behavior or outcomes, then we had better be able to identify the behavior or outcomes we want to see go away. At the same time, we also need to be able to describe the *new* behavior or outcomes that we'd like to see the employee achieve. If we're not clear in what we want people to change, we can hardly expect them to move in that direction.

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Exploring for cause rather than placing blame requires a "systems" perspective

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**Look for cause, not blame.** Every problem has a cause. One key challenge in managing a performance problem lies in sorting through all of the possible causes of a problem and identifying the factors that are the greatest contributors to the problem. Another key challenge is to avoid simply laying the blame on the problem performer. Exploring for cause rather than placing blame requires a "systems" perspective. This involves looking at factors in the work environment that might be contributing to the problem. While this must involve exploring the performer's contribution to the problem, it also means considering the quality of supervisory direction, communication, and performance feedback; the adequacy of skill training; the availability of job-related information and resources; the level of co-worker support; and the presence or absence of rewards for good performance (to name a few of the most common system issues).



**Find out how the employee views the problem.** Too often, our attempts to solve a performance problem fail because we haven't constructively engaged the performer in actually solving the problem. When we finally do bring up our concerns about the employee's performance, the focus tends to be on what he or she is doing wrong which, in turn, leads to their defensiveness. A far better and more constructive approach is to ask the employee to reflect on what's going well about the job and what's not going well—and to offer specific ideas and suggestions for addressing the things not going well. By asking the employee to consider these questions for a couple of days and then to sit down with him or her to hear his or her perspective helps create the beginnings of a coaching relationship

**What's going well in the job?**

**What's NOT going well?**

**What might you do differently to help the job go better?**

**Build a coaching relationship.** A coaching relationship requires you to be a good listener and to be willing to give the "problem employee" a second—or maybe even a third—chance. When you truly listen to and understand the employee's perspective on the performance problem and the employee's ideas on possible solutions, you have moved a big step closer to a resolution. A solution to the performance problem, of course, is your goal. Getting rid of an employee—even one who isn't performing as you'd like—just creates another problem.

### Help is Available

You don't have to face these issues alone. Russell Consulting specializes in helping managers and supervisors create strong and enduring coaching partnerships for improved performance. Our customized training seminars and our executive coaching program help develop the skills you need to deal positively and effectively with performance problems on your team. Call us if you want to learn more about our approach to performance coaching.

*Call Russell Consulting today for a free performance coaching consultation*

(608) 274-4482

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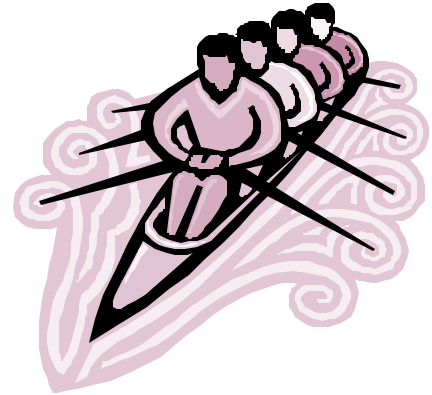
## Assessing Your Team, contd.

❑ **Customer Focus.** Teams exist because they create value for someone. Whether that someone is another team in the company or the customer who purchases or uses the team's product or service, the team is accountable to people or organizations outside the team. For this reason, the first step in evaluating a team's effectiveness involves asking such questions as: Are the needs of the team's customers clearly defined? How often does the team *measure* its effectiveness in serving its customers? And have we established a formal partnership with our customers?

❑ **Performance Management.** Performance is a *process*, not an event. It is more than meeting a deadline and even more than achieving a goal. Strong team performance management involves a thoughtful process of establishing a team vision, identifying challenging performance goals, developing plans to carry out those goals, formally measuring performance effectiveness, and engaging in critical reflection and learning. These key elements of performance management—part of the performance management cycle—must become an integral part of every team's operations if it is to become a high performance team. Some of the questions a team can ask itself for this dimension of effectiveness include: What is the vision or purpose of the team? Is it clear and accepted by all team members? Does the team have clearly defined goals that are realistically challenging? Has the team developed methods for measuring the team's performance?

❑ **Team Processes.** Team effectiveness also depends upon the existence of well-defined and developed processes to manage the team's work. Such processes include team composition and leadership, methods for decision making, resolving conflict, allocating resources, defining member roles, and member training. A team can identify opportunities for improvement in its team processes by exploring questions such as: What is the team's leadership structure? How will team decisions be made? How does the team establish and revise its decision making processes? How well are team meetings managed? Do team members have the resources they need to enable the team to achieve its goals?

❑ **Team Member Relationships.** The quality of the intra-team interactions is the last major dimension of team effectiveness. This dimension concerns itself with how well the team manages disagreement and conflict and how effectively team members communicate with one another. If teams fall apart, it is often due to the team's inability to effectively manage these interpersonal issues. The best teams are fun to be a part of because of the high level of trust, respect, and appreciation that team members feel for each other. These qualities, however, don't happen by accident. They require a conscious effort by team members to manage their intra-team communications and interpersonal relationships well. Questions that explore this dimension include: Does the team periodically set aside time to explore its interpersonal strengths and weaknesses? Does the team pay as much attention to *how* it works together as to what it accomplishes? Are team members skilled at diagnosing internal team problems?



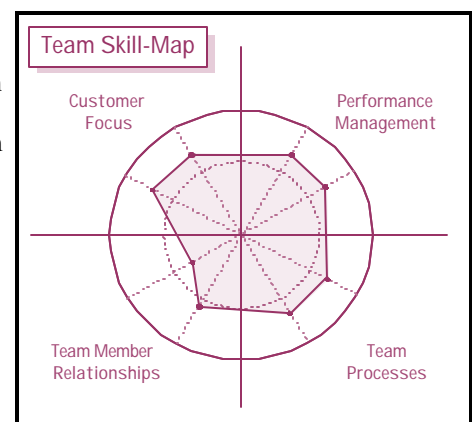
*Would you like a free sample of RCI's Team Skill-Map™?*

**Call Russell Consulting  
(608) 274-4482**

### The Team Skill-Map™

To help teams self-assess their effectiveness on these four key performance dimensions, Russell Consulting, Inc. has developed the Team Skill-Map™. By integrating data from a survey given to each team member, *RCI's* Team Skill-Map™ gives a team specific feedback on its strengths and weaknesses by plotting scores on a "radar" chart. The team then uses these results to discuss and develop an improvement plan for helping the team achieve its expectations and serve the organization or company and its customers well.

**Call us.** Contact Russell Consulting for a free information kit on the Team Skill-Map™. With this powerful tool, you can guide your teams to new levels of performance and effectiveness.



## Employee Attitude Surveys: What Can You Learn?

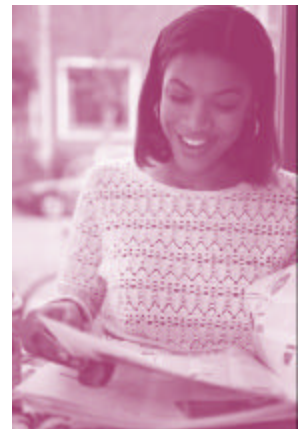
*Quality is impossible  
if people are afraid  
to tell the truth*

– W. Edwards Deming  
Author and statistician  
who popularized  
strategies for quality  
improvement

**E**mployee attitude surveys can save your company. No, they don't directly add value to the product or service you provide your customers, but they do give you important insights into how your employees view your company; what they value most about working for you; what gets in the way of their job satisfaction and performance; and what could be done to improve the quality of your products and services.

**You don't know until you ask.** What do your employees value most about the work that they do? What causes people to work hard for your company? Why do people leave your organization? What ideas do your employees have for improving the way that they do their jobs? Knowing your employees' answers to these important questions can make all the difference between achieving your goals for your company or failing to serve your customers well. Until you know what employees truly value, what turns them on, and what turns them off, your efforts to improve employee satisfaction, reduce turnover, and improve product or service quality will too often simply miss the mark. Conducting a confidential employee or quality of worklife survey gives you powerful insights into employees' views on these questions.

**The customer comes second.** This may sound rather severe, but your company's ability to serve its customers well depends entirely upon how well your own employees believe **they** are being served. While serving your employees probably isn't why you're in business, if you don't understand the importance of this principle, you'll end up losing your top performers—or fail to get the best performance from any of your staff. An employee attitude survey enables you to determine what you can do to strengthen the perception that employees in your firm are indeed well-served.



*Call Russell Consulting  
today to receive a copy of  
our quality of worklife  
survey*

**Surveys give people an opportunity to offer constructive ideas for change.** The late W. Edwards Deming argued that the people who do the work are in the best position to improve the work they do. Unfortunately, most organizations haven't developed effective ways of encouraging employees to offer ideas for improving work processes and product or service quality. An employee attitudes survey provides a formal method for asking employees how their jobs could be improved and for ideas for building better products or better serving the customer.

**What do YOUR employees think?** Contact Russell Consulting to discuss ways to survey your employees. We offer both a standardized survey instrument as well as surveys custom-designed around your company's specific needs. Call RCI today to receive a sample of our standardized survey.



**Enhancing Organizational Performance  
Through Quality Workplace Consulting  
and Training Services**



Linda & Jeff Russell, co-directors of RCI

*Workplace Enhancement Notes* is published periodically by Russell Consulting, Inc. (RCI) for its customers. *Notes* shares insights and issues that emerge from RCI's consulting practice on organizational dimensions of leadership, strategy, change, performance management, motivation, process redesign and improvement, teamwork, and customer service. Contact RCI for a detailed brochure describing the full range of our services.

**Russell Consulting, Inc.**  
1134 Winston Drive  
Madison, WI 53711-3161

*Tel* (608) 274-4482

*Fax* (608) 274-1927

*E-mail* rci@russellconsultinginc.com

*Web* www.russellconsultinginc.com

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