Training vs. Performance Management
-- Just push the damn button!

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I've said it countless times...

You can’t fix stupid.

Now, I know that sounds harsh. And truthfully, I may not mean it exactly as written. But the reality is, sometimes people don’t perform their jobs well, and no amount of training or development will help them.

Obviously, we hope these employees are few and far between.

So, are they?

If so, we’re dealing with statistical certainties; like it or not, everyone gets a slug now and then, even the best of us. If they aren’t few and far between, we have a bigger issue (sourcing, hiring, or leadership), but that’s for a different article.

Oftentimes, we confuse the need for training with the need for more effective performance management. Though perhaps two sides of a management coin, they are actually nothing at all alike.

Training is valuable, no question. Effective learning and ongoing development are critical for employee growth, and to ensure we get the most bang for our payroll buck. But frequently, we throw training at a performance problem, when performance management holds the better solution.

If you’re wondering about my subtitle above, it comes from a brief example I use when discussing the need for training versus
performance management, and it goes something like this: If an employee has but one job, to sit in front of this machine and press a honkin’ big red button once an hour, his/her failure to do so is not a training issue. Assuming an IQ higher than a rock.

We can train this zero until the cows come home (that’s a long time, for the uninitiated), and s/he’ll still have trouble with that damn button.

Why?

Because we’re using a screwdriver to hammer a nail. It’s the wrong tool. Performance management is the hammer in this situation, and we need to use it effectively.

So, how do we know it’s a performance issue?

There are only three reasons that employees fail to do their jobs:

1. **They don’t know how.** The level of complexity exceeds their current knowledge or abilities, and we need to educate them accordingly, and develop appropriately over time. Such is not the case with our errant button-pusher, of course. After all, s/he had been pushing that button all along, and only now seems to be unable.

2. **They don’t know why.** No context. The employee doesn’t understand the process involved, and somehow that lack of understanding is acting as a barrier.

   Perhaps another manager has told him that pushing that button was useless, serving no value whatsoever. Perhaps a co-worker said they only pushed the button every other hour, with no adverse effects. Perhaps somebody told him that he wasn’t supposed to push the button.

   Either way, the process by which this employee does his job is somehow broken.

3. **They don’t want to.** Not motivated to do it, don’t wanna do it, not gonna do it. This could be rebellion against a particular manager (seemingly justified or not), a test of mettle for the current supervisor, or simply a lack of desire to be responsible for that particular task any longer.
**This one is a problem.** “Do it because I said so” is seldom a good way to lead, but the gist is still true: the employee has a job to do and for reasons unbeknownst to us, is refusing to do it. When this occurs, we have a few options:

a. Find out what motivates the employee, and endeavor to do that with him/her,

b. Discipline the employee for lack of or poor performance, or

c. Utilize effective performance management techniques to move unsatisfactory performance to the “satisfactory” level.

None of these are fool-proof, and all involve leadership skill; further, it’s important to realize that other employees – a maybe some that have jobs much more involved than simple button-pushing – are watching. Remember, we are an example whether we want to be or not. We can choose positive or negative, but we’re always the example.

Also remember some axioms of talent management...

• If they always seem to be a “problem employee,” then manage them out of the organization. You don’t need them, their co-workers don’t need them, and they are an emotional sponge to all who come near.

• If they have even a semblance of potential for development and success, and they generally fit the culture, direction, and mood of the organization, we’re almost always better off finding a way to keep the employee instead of showing them the door.

Pay close attention when prescribing training when it may not be the answer; it’s not just a waste of resources (which it is), it may also hide bigger issues.

And the only thing worse than a slug in the workplace is a hidden slug.