

Mindset Newsletter 11/13: Real Leaders don't do Disciplinary

Compiled by Johan Poolman

Article: Real Leaders don't do Disciplinary

Imagine Pieter de Villiers taking Brian Habana before a disciplinary hearing chaired by Oregan Hoskins to address his pre-world cup lack of form. Or Pitso Mosimane giving Teko Modise a formal written warning to address his slump a while back. Granted, these are professional players who stand to lose a bundle of money if they were to get fired, which should in theory be sufficient motivation to invoke at least a temporary spike in their motivational levels. But if it does *not*, will written warnings or disciplinary hearings magically 'motivate' players such as these to excel? Moreover, will such measures work in the more 'run-of-the mill' non-performance cases and – even more importantly – provide lasting performance improvements?

In my humble opinion, disciplinary measures will not fix the problem of problem employees. In fact, since a disciplinary action is a sign of a relationship that has been irreparably damaged, it will probably only serve to aggravate the situation. Which makes me wonder – shouldn't disciplinary actions only be used as a last resort as part of the process of terminating the employee concerned? I say this in response to the comments re disciplinary actions and the all too familiar dilemma of non-responsive problem employees that I received on my last article.

It is an unfortunate fact of business life that many problem employees do not respond to any form of carrot or stick, whether incentives, rewards, counselling, disciplinary measures or even final written warnings. And let's face it – in our unionised and politically primed work environments it is sometimes easier to just turn a blind eye, hoping for some kind of divine intervention that will make the guilty party self-destruct or kindly go away. But problem employees hardly ever 'just go away', so we all too easily fall into the trap of spending too much time trying to rectify their negative attitudes instead of focusing our attention on the positive employees who want to grow and learn.

People usually behave in accordance with internal drivers that are governed by how they perceive and experience the world around them. Which I guess is why alcohol makes one do stupid things! No carrot or stick external measure – bar divine intervention – will result in lasting internal change; it will at best have a limited or temporary impact on problem behaviour. Problem employees will do whatever is required not to get fired, but unless something has made them modify their internal drivers, will soon revert back to their tried and tested obnoxious behaviour. Or in soccer-speak: *a coach can teach a player how to dribble, pass and shoot the right way, but a coach cannot make the player do it the right way.*

Funny thing is – most problem employees didn't start out as problem employees. Instead, problem employees usually develop patterns of negative behaviour over time, in response to a work environment where they feel underutilised, unappreciated and disconnected from organisational priorities – classical symptoms of disengaged employees. Disengaged employees will typically

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display no enthusiasm or energy towards their work and will indulge in contagious negativity towards their colleagues, clients and the organisation. Disengaged employees are bad for any organisation and should be 'disciplinarianed' and removed from the organisation if they can't be coaxed into changing their behaviour.

Throwing money and other forms of incentives and benefits after disengaged employees usually don't help – at least, not on a sustained basis. To be engaged, employees have to be emotionally committed and personally involved with their organisations – they don't only need to be well paid; they need a meaningful and rewarding work environment that will induce them to modify their internal drivers. People who get satisfaction from their jobs (*'I like my work and I am good at it'*) and feel they have meaningful jobs (*'I play a role and contribute towards my organisation's mission'*) will almost invariably be internally driven to work harder and to put in extra effort.

This may be easier said than done. Individual managers will in most cases not have sufficient control over their work environments to create all the conditions necessary for optimal employee engagement. What is required is for top management to create the strategic context and organisational framework within which individual managers can drive the necessary actions and measures that will help employees enjoy their work and make them feel they are contributing towards organisational goals.

But let's face it: there is a lot that individual managers can do to help their team members find purpose and satisfaction in their work – even if not fully supported from the top. Real leaders will go out of their way to really get to know and value each of their team members so they can match them to suitable roles, set accurate expectations for them, provide them with regular feedback, pass praise and credit on to them, and help them to develop and further their careers. And they will make sure that each team member clearly understands and appreciates how he or she contributes towards the organisation's mission. To quote Jim Valvano, legendary American basketball coach: *'A person really doesn't become whole, until he becomes a part of something that's bigger than himself.'*

So there you go: Real leaders don't do disciplinaries – instead, they do their best to create meaningful and rewarding work environments where team members will be internally driven to deliver superior performance.

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Best wishes,

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