Stanford eCorner

Dealing with Challenging Employees

Dan Springer, *Responsys*

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Dan Springer, CEO of Responsys, talks about the challenges of dealing with problematic employees. Springer suggests that it is easier to deal with clear under-performers whereas the greater challenge is to address team members who have both positive and damaging qualities. Springer suggests that the best response to these situations is to have a clear and frank conversation with the team member which gives them an opportunity to improve.

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Transcript

How have you either dealt with difficult employee situations? How do you kind of manage the tension when things aren't working so well? There's three buckets, right? There's the bucket for "Things that are going great". And that's obvious. You try to find more opportunities and you try to find situations that people are going to be empowered and motivated to go take on the next hill because they're doing it for their own development. And obviously, you get the benefit to the company, and they do great things. The other easy place is someone that just doesn't fit. They're either not capable, they have some intrinsic capability problems, or they have good capabilities but they just don't fit in the organization for whatever reason and they're not being successful. Those are unfortunate and uncomfortable, but you know the right answer. And if you're like most people, or if you're like me, you stall. You wait a little, you hope it'll get better, even though there's no reason you should expect it to get better. You hope a little bit more and you wait until someone you trust tells you, "You know the answer.

You have to face the unfortunate separation discussion." But those are really pretty easy, even though we all stall and avoid them as long as we reasonably can. The hardest ones for me is when someone has real value that they're adding, but also has a real problem. We recently had a situation with someone at a technical support role. She was phenomenal at technical support. Our customers loved her and thought she was one of the smartest people, unless she thought you weren't smart. If she thought you weren't smart, she'd talk down to you, made you feel bad, insulted you not very subtly about your intelligence, which is a problem in customer-facing jobs. It's also a problem in the company. What do you do when someone's got all this talent, all this capability, a skill set that takes us a long time to develop in employees, but is just completely unacceptable in their interpersonal dealings? This one actually had a recent fine resolution in that, while on a performance plan, she chose to leave. That came to probably the right outcome from that standpoint, but really frustrating because you'd think, gosh, that's one where you should be able to coach someone away from the clearly inappropriate interpersonal behavior side. And I think this is one where it's about being frank.

Our approach was to sit down, we had to think through the legal and HR issues about the communications for a variety of reasons, but just sit down and be blunt. And just say, "Here's the feedback. All these people, it's not just me, but multiple people are saying these are the issues. And if you can't change that, you can't be successful here." And I think if you try to sugarcoat that or if you try to deliver it with a message of "I know it's not your fault" or whatever else we want to do as human beings to deliver a more polite message, you're not doing yourself any good, your company any good, and you're clearly not helping that individual. So I think it's really important. You owe it to be unbelievably frank with folks if they have a performance challenge because it's really the only shot they've got to recovering, is accepting that they've got that gap.