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RESURRECTING THE WORK ETHIC
IMPROVING PERFORMANCE IN LINE AND STAFF-SUPPORT WORKERS

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A TALE OF TWO PERCEPTIONS

At a time when fully-empowered knowledge workers are so highly valued in today's organizations, the future of line and staff-support workers is not nearly as rosy. Like knowledge workers, these men and women are mission-critical. They build the products, keep the equipment running, do the routine paperwork, interact directly with the customer—in short, they perform the thousands of tasks without which no organization can prosper.

There exists, however, a troubling disconnect between these workers and their employers. Workers see their jobs as thankless, boring and dead-end, and they wonder why they should bother to make an effort. Employers look at these workers and see low skills, high turnover and a poor work ethic, and they wonder why they should bother to develop them.

Having pioneered communication skills training for first-line workers in the early 1980s, Achieve-Global recently completed a year-long study to explore this gap. The challenge was to identify the competencies that employers are looking for and that also help employees (and potential employees) gain a sense of mastery over their work and lives. The study included:

- Surveys and interviews of managers, trainers and transition-to-work program leaders.

- Pilot testing (with a cross-section of the research population) of new training in communication, teamwork and life-management skills.

- Focus groups with training participants after each pilot test.

Training and focus group participants included new and experienced employees and trainees in school-to-work and public assistance-to-work programs. Participants held or sought such first-line jobs as:

production worker   service representative
installer   machine operator
data-entry clerk   security guard
driver   construction worker
housekeeper   inventory clerk
retail clerk   groundskeeper
medical records clerk secretary
janitor

The study began with written surveys and structured interviews of 45 managers, trainers and transition-to-work program leaders with direct experience with the research population. Twenty-one hours of new skills and awareness training were designed and refined over 12 successive pilot tests and related focus groups. The research sample of 240 included line and staff-support employees in a range of industries and participants in school-to-work and public assistance-to-work training programs.

Brief descriptions of a few pilot-test participants illustrate some of the challenges and anxieties that affect job performance in the study group.[1]

• Aaron, 24, has had a series of entry-level jobs since he finished community college. Now an operator in a photocopy center, Aaron works hard, but he's frustrated that advancement is so slow. He speaks bluntly about conditions in the office, often creating tension with co-workers. Lately, he has been complaining about his supervisor, who, in Aaron's view, fails to address serious performance problems in some co-workers.

• Kate, 34, is a single mother of two. She has received public assistance for two years, though she has some prior work experience. Now in a public assistance-to-work program, Kate takes computer training, among other classes. Though she welcomes the prospect of becoming a wage-earning member of society, she's unsure of her skills and deeply fearful she won't measure up when she gets a job.

• Howard, 40, married with no children, has been a hospital janitor for six years. His early aspirations have given way to acceptance of the narrow scope of his job, and he is now a steady though unexceptional worker. Howard no longer takes initiative when he sees problems, rarely speaking up in meetings or with his supervisor. He avoids confrontation, but when provoked, he can blow up emotionally.

• Danny, 25, has lived with his family since coming to this country two years ago. A factory line worker, he attends ESL classes twice a week.

Danny is prone to mistakes at work because he doesn't always understand instructions, and he's reluctant to ask questions for fear of appearing incompetent.

- Lynn, 19, shares an apartment with a former schoolmate and works at her first job, as a call-center phone rep. She understands but often fails to meet minimum expectations—getting to work on time, handling the required number of calls, adhering to call guidelines and so on. Since work is plentiful in her town, Lynn plans to find a better-paying job, like her roommate's.

THE OBSERVERS SPEAK

In the surveys and interviews of managers, trainers and transition-to-work program leaders, they described incidents of effective and ineffective employee performance. The respondents certainly told of workers who went beyond the expected, demonstrated leadership: helping a co-worker succeed and so on. Still, incidents involving employees who failed in some way inspired these observers to far greater passion and detail. Negative behaviors described in the interviews fell into the following categories (with a few examples):

- *Failure to meet minimum requirements* – ("fell asleep," "wore a halter top and shorts," "smelled bad," "called in sick once a week," "stayed home to wash his car," "left for an errand and never came back")

- *Lack of respect for others and low self-esteem* – ("blamed others," "made sexually-charged comments," "couldn't bounce back from criticism," "expected to be fired")

- *Failure to assume responsibility* – ("wouldn't ask for help," "ran to the supervisor with every little problem," "refused to learn anything new," "couldn't set realistic daily goals," "couldn't see beyond his task set")

- *Poor teamwork* – ("knowingly passed on faulty work," "made half-baked excuses," "stole a co-worker's idea," " collected money for a cake and never brought it in," "wouldn't pitch in")

- *Poor communication* – ("wouldn't speak up in meetings," "wouldn't make eye contact," "used bad urban vernacular," "wouldn't say hello or please or thank you")

- *Emotional behavior* – ("blew up at customers," "bad-mouthed the company to a customer," "couldn't keep home stress at home," "knocked her supervisor out cold")

- *Low job commitment* – ("wanted less work, more fun, and quicker promotion," "all the job meant was a new CD player," "no pride in the work," "no self-motivation")

By far the most common phrase in the surveys and interviews of managers, trainers and transition-to-work program leaders was some version of "they lack a strong work ethic"—perhaps with some justification given the many negative incidents.

However, when we analyzed what employees themselves told us, a different picture emerged. A small percentage of the sample group made comments that support the observers' prevailing view that the overall population lacks a strong work ethic. This small subgroup tended to see a job as temporary employment with little value beyond a paycheck. One young woman, for example, described her work life as "a string of 'McJobs.'" Many in this subgroup failed to see (or, at least, to say) that even a minimum-wage job is an opportunity to gain skills and therefore long-term value in the job market. They also failed to see (or admit) the negative impact of their performance on their teammates and the organization as a whole. Although these workers were the exception in our study, their high-profile failings apparently skewed the observers' opinions and contributed to the observers' view that most in the research population "lack a strong work ethic."

The large majority of the research group expressed a strong desire to succeed in their jobs, and in what they hoped would be more rewarding future jobs. These employees (much like the observers) often complained about their under-performing co-workers. "I don't want to be stuck in a nowhere job for the rest of my life," said a typical pilot participant. "Other people don't look at it like that. They look at it like this is a job, I'm not looking for promotions, I don't care." These more career-minded workers—again, the majority in the study—often described their jobs as an opportunity to gain skills and experience that pay off in the long run.

Yet, even if they expressed hope of improving their lives through work, many in the study group also described the futility they feel in their jobs. After two days of pilot training, for example, one woman said, "This [training] has helped me realize a lot of goals that I've kind of put away that I should probably dredge up and begin again with these new skills I've learned."

What caused this woman and others like her to "put away" their goals and perform at minimal or substandard levels? According to workers in our research sample, the causes are varied.

- *Unproductive co-workers* – "In our office some people do 95 percent of the work. The other five percent is done by people who are doing homework four and five hours a day, playing on the Web another hour, and then wandering around. If I let it really upset me, I'd be a basket case. So I don't let it upset me."

- *Insecurity* – "They're afraid for, I don't know, like you're going to learn too much and then you'll be able to do their job and they won't. There's a lot of insecurity down there, a lot of insecurity."

- *Peer pressure not to excel* – "When you work as a team you want to do your best job and help each other, but without being competitive and trying to make yourself look good at somebody else's expense. So how do you balance that? Is there such a thing?"

- **Turnover** – "[Since] June...we've had nine different people come through our site. And it's a four-person site! So we've changed almost everybody except me, and it's unbelievably frustrating."

- **Lack of respect** – "Some people are allowed to get away with not just putting down your idea, but putting you down personally, especially when they tell you it was a stupid idea. You're not going to say anything again. And it's hard to work with that person when you walk out of the meeting."

- **Lack of recognition** – "[Supervisors] want you to give 150 percent. But if you gave 155 percent, they would never know the difference, so it doesn't matter. That kind of disillusions you. You figure, well, gee, why I am doing this?"

- **Lack of self-control** – "I had an on-going conflict with another person. One time we both had enough of it and we just took it outside in the parking lot. And we both ended up losing our jobs."

- **Lack of self-confidence** – "I'm afraid to ask for help because then I feel that I'm not doing my job."

So, while observers and workers may disagree on the *causes* of poor performance, both groups agree on the observable *facts* of poor performance. Both described behaviors and conditions that call out for a clear set of new employee competencies.

BOTTOM-LINE VALUE IN BOTTOM-LINE SKILLS

Most organizations train line and staff-support employees only in technical skills. But according to research reported by Daniel Goleman in *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, "competencies such as managing one's emotions, handling encounters well, [and] teamwork" are literally more important to long-term success than technical skills and I.Q. combined, even in first-line jobs.[2] When Goleman studied competence models for 181 different jobs in 121 companies, he found that 67 percent of the competencies identified as essential to job success—two out of every three—were "emotional competencies" such as self-control, conscientiousness, trustworthiness and demonstrating empathy and tact during social interactions.[3]

"Finding employees who have these abilities, or nurturing them in existing employees, adds tremendous value to the bottom line," writes Goleman. He then cites a landmark study comparing the economic value of workers who possess these competencies with the value of workers who don't.[4] The findings: "For simpler jobs, like machine operators or clerks, those in the top 1 percent produced three times more output than those in the bottom 1 percent. For jobs of medium complexity, like sales clerks or mechanics, a top performer was twelve times more productive than

those at the bottom were. That is, a single person in the top 1 percent was worth twelve people in the bottom 1 percent."[5]

Goleman's work quantifies the bottom-line value of communication, teamwork and life management skills; it also confirms the specific competencies our study found wanting in the research group. Analysis of our surveys, interview data and pilot-test and focus-group results yielded a relatively short list of needed competencies.

1. ***Treat others with respect.*** Good relationships with supervisors and co-workers are critical for every employee. Yet building those relationships is a challenge for many workers, especially in organizations where supervisors demonstrate little respect for their direct reports. Low self-esteem and self-confidence, a special problem for the research group, generate defensive or abusive behaviors and lackluster performance, which in turn depress the possibility of positive work relationships.

2. ***Take responsibility for understanding what's expected.*** Given the pace of most work settings, the fear of appearing incompetent and lack of appropriate models can make even experienced employees hesitate to seek needed information. When taking on an assignment or learning a task, effective employees identify gaps in their knowledge, ask focused questions, and encourage others to share information and verify what they hear.

3. ***Communicate clearly with customers, co-workers and supervisors.*** Expressing oneself clearly is especially challenging with a co-worker one doesn't know well, during a meeting or with someone in authority. Yet, beginning with the job interview, the ability to speak clearly and confidently is vital to long-term success. Outstanding first-line employees understand the value of speaking up, and they minimize their anxieties by applying practical skills in organizing and delivering a message.

4. ***Respond constructively to changes in the workplace.*** Today, the norm is constant change. But because of the natural resistance to change, it's easy for many workers to feel victimized by change or to become an impediment to change. Employees who succeed long-term recognize and act on the opportunities in any organizational change. They come to grips with their own resistance, weigh their options, find positive responses, and encourage others to do the same.

5. ***Work well in teams.*** In most jobs, success depends on coordinated effort and helping one another in a pinch. Where team skills and awareness are weak, one employee can drag down the performance of the entire team, often with serious impact on other groups. Effective employees see the bigger picture for any group effort, extend a hand to teammates, express appreciation for the efforts of teammates, and make their own needs known in constructive ways.

6. ***Deal effectively with emotional situations.*** Under the pressure of shifting priorities, deadlines and the like, anyone can lose emotional control or respond in kind when verbally attacked. Members of the research population may be in greater danger of losing control, often because they've had few positive models to emulate. Once employees understand the consequences of unrestrained anger, they can explore what tends to set them off and learn techniques for staying in control and productively handling a verbal attack.

7. ***Balance home and work priorities.*** Though attendance is not an issue for most employees, some people transitioning to work from school or public assistance may not see the link between regular attendance and their own long-term success. Even when they do, inability to handle outside emergencies and temptations may lead to absenteeism. These employees benefit from learning to plan for inevitable personal emergencies.

FOR MANY, A TOUGH ROAD

The study found that to learn and apply these competencies, many employees must overcome one or more significant obstacles, each with implications for training.

Self-esteem – A contributing cause of sub-standard job performance is low self-esteem. Lack of work experience, lack of formal education, lack of recognition, few models of good work habits, long-term dependency, a history of failure in the workplace: These and other conditions render many in the research population unable or unwilling to excel. The study found, for example, that fear of speaking up, even one-to-one, is enormous. Employees might not ask the question that prevents significant rework. They might not point out a problem with a negative impact on customers. They might not give vital information to a co-worker.

So, while training focused on the identified competencies, building self-esteem was a constant subtext that shaped the training in a number of ways. During successive pilot tests and revisions, the training gave increasing attention to the often fragile self-esteem of participants.

- Lecture and reading were replaced with activities that cover basic content and build self-esteem at the same time. Participants might work alone to think of a response to a question or topic; work in small groups to confirm, compare and refine their ideas; then share their ideas with the large group. Finally, the trainer would summarize their thoughts and add key missing points. These and comparable activities also gave people a chance to sort through unhappy work experiences and decide how to handle similar events in the future.

- For some in this group, a history of struggling in school makes abstract content a threat to self-esteem. So testing proceeded in part by paring away supplementary content and making what remained vivid and practical—usually a set of basic tools or steps summarized in an acronym to aid memory.[6] Participants then added content from their own experience, a training technique that boosted self-confidence, to help them quickly master the content.

- Trainers did not chide or moralize. In the testing, when a participant began rationalizing a problem behavior, fellow participants usually pointed out any self-deception involved. For example, when a man explained that his foul-weather absences were due to his snow-covered driveway, others laughed and offered to lend him a shovel.

These and other approaches brought this typical response from a training participant: "You kept asking us questions, as if we had something to contribute. No one ever did that before."

Emotional control – Many employees in the study described their struggle to manage their emotions and respond constructively to aggressive behavior from co-workers and supervisors. Managers, trainers and transition-to-work program leaders described a widespread failure in the research group to foresee and avoid the consequences of emotional behavior. A typical incident described by a manager: "She yelled at her supervisor and then expected to have a job the next day." The primary issue for training is that most of these employees, through lack of experience or role models, haven't found alternatives to direct expression of anger and frustration. To tell them "Don't blow up because you'll get fired" is not news. Instead, it's important to give them ways to reduce immediate tension and promote positive, long-term work relationships.

The first version of training in this area advised a conflict-resolution process familiar from training for managers, professionals and skilled technicians: approach the individual involved, describe the issue, facilitate a rational discussion, and agree on a course of action. Testing made it clear, however, that while this process works for seasoned workers aware of the danger of losing control, a rational discussion assumes the ability to refrain from and calmly respond to direct verbal attack. Revised training focused on helping employees gain control of their emotions, acknowledge the other person's point of view, and build a work relationship in which teamwork is possible.

English skills – To improve communication and teamwork in people who do not read, write or speak English well, the training adopted several features:

- Graphic participant materials with minimal text at or below a fifth-grade reading level.

- Very little in-class reading (or, when necessary, reading aloud in small groups by an English-literate group member).

- Activities and games that ask people to stand up and move about, sort cards, arrange sticky notes, make something, draw a picture, and so on.

- Extensive video with familiar work and home situations, diverse actors, humor, motion graphics and struggling characters who eventually succeed through a given competency.

Overall, varied activities driving home practical content proved effective for people with developing English skills (and for the research group as a whole). Said one participant, "I really don't speak English well because I've not been long in America. I learned a lot of things in this meeting. I get self-confidence."

THE ROOTS OF SUCCESS

Given some observers' perception of "a poor work ethic" in the research group, the reaction of training participants to an important piece of content, "The Basic Principles,"[7] held special interest. After brief discussion, participants were able to suggest real or imagined examples of each principle.

1. *Focus on the situation, problem, or behavior, not on the person* – "If you're trying to show somebody a mistake, instead of getting them all defensive, which is our natural reaction, you put them at ease and you correct the problem. It makes it easier on both sides."

2. *Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others* – "There are co-workers you could train on a certain procedure three or four times, but they still don't seem to grasp it. It's good not to make them feel inferior or stupid. You build up their confidence so they'll retain the procedure more."

3. *Maintain constructive relationships* – "I come across sometimes as real pushy, just because of the way I communicate. Being here has taught me a lot of different points of view, different ways to go at it than just being aggressive all the time."

4. *Take initiative to make things better* – "Sometimes I feel like I'm going to hit a brick wall, so I just keep it to myself. And then instead of having one situation, all of a sudden you have six different situations. So it's better to take the initiative in the beginning."

5. *Lead by example* – "It's hard to set an example when you don't know how. [This training] gives you the kind of know-how to make sure you're not going to tick someone off."

The Basic Principles, in a sense, are a behavioral picture of "a strong work ethic." When workers take initiative to solve problems, treat others with respect, build good relationships, and so on, they demonstrate a strong work ethic. Training participants had no difficulty with the meaning and implications of the Basic Principles—indicating a clear theoretical grasp of "a strong work ethic."

They immediately saw the Basic Principles as a self-evident foundation for positive interactions with supervisors and co-workers. In fact, for many participants the Basic Principles appeared to express some part of a pre-existing belief system. Participants did not say they often followed the Principles or saw them followed on the job. Still, they later cited the Basic Principles more than any other training content as critical to their future success.

CLOSING THE GAP

If the Basic Principles do paint a behavioral picture of the work ethic, then the research found many employees who recognize, if not demonstrate, a strong work ethic. So, according to employees, why isn't the work ethic more evident in their own day-to-day actions? Among workers, the most frequently cited cause of poor performance was poor leadership.

- ***Work harder, or else*** – "[A supervisor should] show people that do the work a little respect, and say, 'Hey, you're doing a great job. Thank you very much.' Now it's like, 'Get your job done or you're fired.' And that's making everybody fight each other."

- ***You're not paid to think*** – "Supervisors that don't listen to your point of view bother me. Sometimes another person has another way of doing the same task—maybe even faster."

- ***Thanks, your majesty*** – "We get the job done and done right in case somebody comes by—the Queen of England, let's say—and says,

'Beautiful! Look at this job! Who did it?' And the supervisor raises his hand: 'I did it!' Actually, he didn't do none of it. They get all the credit. We get nothing."

- ***Do as I say, not as I do*** – "I have a direct supervisor who gets abrasive, abusive… She'll just say, 'Because I said so,' or something like that, which to me is not an answer. I never even answered my children that way. That's what I'm up against."

- ***I'm the boss, you're not*** – "Here, it's a you-against-us atmosphere, which is really a shame. [Supervisors get] a little bit of power and it goes to their heads. Not with everyone. I'm not going to generalize. But I've been around here long enough to know it's a problem."

Comments like these don't prove that lackluster performance always or even usually stems from ineffective leadership. They do raise further questions about how well supervisors are trained to support first-line employees.

- Do supervisors show workers the respect they want workers to show one another?

- Do supervisors model and coach communication and teamwork skills?

- Who are the most productive supervisors? What are they doing?

- Do supervisors allow simmering individual performance problems to affect other employees?

- How can supervisors help motivated employees cope with marginal performers?

- Do supervisors regularly recognize team and individual results?

- Does the reward system encourage exceptional effort?

Despite the effect of unskilled supervision, our study found the work ethic very much alive. Many in the research population truly want to succeed and, given skills and support, will work hard to succeed. Other employees, unable to see a future unlike their past, need a vision of success as well as active support. The study also found that in this population it's the rare worker—motivated or not—who has a complete set of needed skills. Lack of training, lack of role models and lack of trained leadership leave most workers unable or unwilling to seek information, deliver a clear message, work in a team, seize the opportunities in change, control their emotions, or balance home and work priorities. Finally, the study confirmed that training alone—supervisory, front-line or both—cannot bridge the gap between workers and their employers. What it can do is promote a shared, even inspiring vision of a productive and respectful work place, and build the skills that help make that vision real.

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REFERENCES

[1] Names are fictional.

[2] Goleman, Daniel, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam, 1998, p. 9.

[3] Goleman, op. cit., p. 31.

[4] Hunter, John E., Frank L. Schmidt, and Michael K. Judiesch, "Individual Differences in Output Variability as a Function of Job Complexity," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75, I (1990).

[5] Goleman, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

[6] E.g., "TEAM," an acronym summarizing four strategies for effective teamwork: Think big picture, Extend a hand, Appreciate others, and Make your needs known.

[7] "The Basic Principles" are the exclusive property of AchieveGlobal, Inc.

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