AN HR PERSPECTIVE: A SERIES ON MANAGEMENT IN LIBRARIES -- ARE THERE WEEDS IN YOUR GARDEN? CAN THEY BE CULTIVATED OR SHOULD THEY BE PLUCKED?

by Mary Stanley

[The following article is a part of a series written by Mary Stanley. The series, an outcome of her recent sabbatical, will focus on HR issues in libraries and will be featured in upcoming issues of *Indiana Libraries*.]

Comparing your organization to a garden may seem ludicrous but let's take a closer look at your "garden." When an organization is truly successful, every employee is a high performing individual. Unfortunately, most organizations have a few "weeds" and what happens when these are left unattended? The weeds in this instance aren't the problem employees. Those you can handle through discipline procedures or termination. The weeds here blend in somewhat and aren't as easily identified. They are the marginal or mediocre employees. By definition, marginal means "on the edge." In organizational terms, marginal employees are those employees who live on the edge of "being productive" (Hale, 1992). They exist because the organization has allowed them to do so.

Reading through the literature on marginal or mediocre employees, over and over again the literature indicates that the fault lies with the supervisor or the organization. For many organizations, tolerating the marginal employee has become an unspoken code of conduct (Axelrod, Jones, & Michaels, 2002). One researcher noted that "a fourth of the employees are totally turned off by their jobs, fully half the workers do just enough to get by, and only the remaining 25 percent are enthusiastic" (Bates, 2004). It is easier to avoid the issue rather than deal with the emotional and other barriers that might accompany addressing the problem. The very act of identifying or pointing out these employees can be a humiliating experience. These employees are not bad employees. They scrape by, perhaps even progress a little, but they rarely are creative or take initiative or inspire others. It is difficult for the supervisor and/or organization to confront these individuals especially if they have worked many years for the organization. They may have even at one time been high performers. One fear that the organization or supervisor might have in tackling this situation is litigation. The idea of a suit against the organization is enough reason for many supervisors to steer clear of that type of action.

How do you identify these marginal or mediocre employees? I am sure that if you think about marginal employees on your staff, a face in your organization will come to mind. These are the employees who do not really do what's expected of them. They don't realize or accept that they are not meeting supervisor expectations. Sometimes you give them a job, spend time explaining it to them, and when it comes back to you, it hasn't been done right. Oftentimes when you ask them a question, they come back to you with more questions. They do not meet their deadlines, cannot complete tasks as described, forget to do simple things, and don't understand your negative reaction to a situation they consider insignificant. These individuals combine the attributes of inaccuracy, misunderstanding, and miscommunication all in one (Pitroda, 2001).

How can you handle mediocrity? The first step is to begin a dialog. If you don't begin to address it, the organization will continue to suffer. Allowing mediocrity to continue only stifles the organization as a whole. It is demeaning to your high performers and will affect their morale and motivation when they see this behavior condoned by the management (Mariotti, 1997). By allowing marginal performance to exist, we are sending a message that marginality is acceptable. Marginal performance then becomes our expected level of performance.

When an employee is hired, a commitment is made by the employer to help the employee succeed in the job. Under that commitment, the organization owes a great deal of effort to help the employee be a positive person who makes positive contributions to the organization. If this employee becomes a mediocre or marginal employee, as well as identifying that the individual is a marginal employee, one should also determine why this has occurred. Employees learn what is expected, what is tolerated, and what is not acceptable. When it becomes apparent that an employee has marginalized his performance, the attitude of the supervisor of the employee will shift to a negative tone. No matter how objective that supervisor has been in the past about the employee's performance, the supervisor will find it hard to maintain that objectivity. There are basically two options in dealing with the marginal employees—work with them to improve or fire them. This sounds harsh, but in much of the literature terminating the employee is the most appropriate action.

Before you can begin the process of implementing either option, you must have standards in place. Several researchers indicate using the "iron hand in a velvet glove approach" (Axelrod. et. al, 2002; Anonymous, 2002). In this approach, the iron hand symbolizes the need to positively tackle the anxiety and inaction connected with these performers and the velvet glove ensures that the situation is handled in a professional yet diplomatic manner. In order to begin this process, you must have specific goals and objectives for each position and must measure (assess) the individual's performance against these goals. Clear goals come from well written job descriptions with explicit outcomes listed for performance. Once these tasks are listed with expected results, you will be able to set up a measurement system.

Another term for this assesment is evaluation or review. Most of you are probably already conducting such a review, but how reliable is it? Do you rate most of your people as "outstanding" or "good"? And for those personnel that you are rating as "effective" or "satisfactory," are you setting goals and expectations for them to improve and holding them accountable? How much preparation time do you spend in getting ready for your review with employees? And how often do you conduct a review with your employees? Is it once a year or is it ongoing throughout the year? I find that many organizations rely on the once-a-year approach more often than the ongoing review because of the time factor, but how can you truly monitor an individual's performance if you are only meeting with them once a year?

How often should you evaluate employees? The answer is "it depends." There is an abundance of literature on performance appraisals and evaluation. The ideal and most effective performance review processes occur year round (Messmer, 2004). Respond immediately when employees do something well or when you identify an area for improvement. This reinforces expectations, encourages good performance to continue, and brings changes in behavior of those needing improvement. Employees want feedback on how they are performing regardless of how long an employee has been working for the organization. It also protects the employee to have work reviewed on a regular basis because it prevents surprises which no one likes, and the employee needs to be able to make corrections as early as possible.

What does a good performance appraisal/evaluation look like? That too, will depend on the organization and what you intend to evaluate. While there may be some variations depending on the job task, you will want to rate the same general factors of all staff. These categories should be in all evaluations: competency or how well an individual performs basic job duties, teamwork, ethics, and initiative. The real benefit of a performance appraisal is not evaluation but rather performance improvement. This is usually the basis for dealing with the mediocre or marginal employee.

One approach to begin the evaluation process is having the employee prepare a self appraisal to turn in before the actual review session is conducted. This self appraisal should include the employee's identification of tasks and how he or she perceives they are doing with them. It should also include what things they consider that they have done well in this past evaluation or review period and if there are any rough spots or things that haven't gone as well. This helps supervisors understand how employees perceive themselves and also helps identify problems that are a result of a training gap.

Another key in evaluation and review is to be sure that supervisors who are conducting annual reviews have training in the evaluation activity. If an individual has never supervised before and has not had the opportunity for performance evaluation training, they are at a disadvantage in their role as supervisor. They may not be prepared to handle the situation if an employee gets upset during the review. For evaluations to be as accurate as possible, reviewers should receive training in the development of performance standards and objectives, goal setting, observation, and documentation skills (Pynes, 1997). They should also learn how to complete the evaluation instruments, how to give performance feedback, and how to avoid rating errors. Performance appraisals rely on human judgment, and supervisors will need to learn how to diffuse personal biases. The evaluations must accurately reflect job performance, and the attitude of the person conducting the evaluation has a major impact on how employees perceive the process. If the evaluator approaches the process as a "gotcha" process or as a "put down" process, then the one being evaluated will certainly be anxious and will not trust the process nor benefit from it.

How then do you prepare the marginal or mediocre employee for the reviewing process? Begin the process with an attitude that you're trying to help the employee be a better employee. Know the expected reasons for poor performance before you evaluate. Here are three of the most frequent reasons for poor performance: 1) the employee lacks the skills and/or training to do the job well, 2) the employee believes what he/she has been told to do is not the best way to accomplish the task, and 3) the employee doesn't know what to do. It's easy to assume that employees understand what is to be done when they really do not know. It's difficult to hold an employee accountable for performance expectations that have not been well communicated. Clearly define what is to be done, ask the employee to relay what he/she understands his/her task to be to see if they have understood, and document that you have clearly communicated your expectations.

Robert D. Behn (1995), director of the Governors Center at Duke University, writes that employee evaluations should motivate. This is essentially what we are hoping to do with the marginal employee—motivate them to become better performers. Involve employees in the process. Ask them questions during the review process so that your perceptions and their perceptions of what is happening are on the same frequency. Involving employees also tells them they are important and have good ideas. Listen carefully to what they have to say about how they are doing. Try to create an atmosphere in which employees can feel secure that the evaluator is really trying to make them and the organization better. Asking a number of questions should help the employee better understand the problem and identify ways to improve. Be sure to state the problem specifically even though it might be easier to gloss over the issue for fear of making the employee angry. Such specificity will also help you maintain a level, emotional response to the situation. Stating the problem more than once also helps to emphasize the importance of the concerns.

Do not argue with the employee when discussing performance problems. Keep your objectivity. Getting angry, raising your voice, shaking your finger, or standing up and lecturing the employee are counterproductive measures. There is a better chance that the employee will control emotions if the supervisor is self-controlled.

The "velvet glove" side of dealing with the marginal employees is demonstrated by treating the employee with dignity, respect, and care (Axelrod et al, 2002). Be positive with the employee on the things that they have done well, but don't sugar coat the truth. All employees have some distinctive strengths and some significant weaknesses. Telling them about their strengths affirms them. In that same respect, telling them candidly about their weaknesses will enable them to work at overcoming them.

Telling people to improve without providing them a plan of action is unhelpful. The individual may feel like he/she is being set up to be fired. Marginal or mediocre performers need specific guidance on how to do things differently in order to make a significant change in their performance. Involve the employee in determining what steps they need to take for improvement.

One technique that was used at Arrow Electronics was called the formal "corrective action plan" (Axelrod et al, 2002). In this plan, it clearly specified what the individual had to do to improve within a defined time period (up to six months), and it required the supervisor to provide frequent coaching to help the employee achieve these goals. If the employee had not sufficiently improved at the end of the defined period they were asked to leave, but Arrow reports that about half the individuals who go through this corrective action process succeed and sustain an acceptable level of performance. This program is more constructive than punitive.

How do you establish these new goals with the marginal employee? Write short-term performance goals or objectives for those areas in which the employee needs to improve. You know what changes you want so come into the conference with these goals in mind or written down. You will better ensure success if you ask the employee for input into the goals and have the employee be part of the process of finalizing the goals. The plan must be realistic, fair, and clear to both you as supervisor and to the employee. Having the employee involved in defining the objective or short term goal will help motivate him/her to become more effective.

Scott Geller (2001) uses the acronym SMART when setting goals with his employees. "S" stands for specific tasks and goals; "M" represents motivational; "A" is for attainable goals; "R" refers to relevancy; and "T" represents trackable. The SMART goal technique is just one example of using a method to establish goals, but these goals should also be flexible. You should be able to change objectives as situations change. Assigning too many performance goals can overwhelm employees. As one author states, small baby steps might be the route to take to ensure improvement (Pitroda, 2001). And even at that, the work and goals should be reviewed within 90 days to see if progress is occurring. Continue the dialogue and review earlier than the next 90 day period. Check on the individual within the first couple of weeks to see how they are doing. See if they need further instruction or guidance or if you need to adjust the goal in any way. Be a supporter so that the employee will feel that you are really interested in his/her improvement. Collaboration and empowerment demonstrated on an ongoing basis are effective in most settings.

In a survey done by Towers Perrin, a consulting firm in New York, to identify what causes workers to be engaged in their work, they found the following to be key: Senior managers interested in the employee's well being, challenging work, decision-making authority, evidence that the organization is focused on customers, career advancement opportunities, a collaborative work environment where people function well in teams, resources to get the job done, input on decision making, the organization's reputation as an employer, and a clear vision from senior management (Bates, 2004). Worker engagement with their work results in productivity and achieving the goals and tasks by which their performance is reviewed.

The Gallup Organization, based in Washington, D.C., developed a dozen questions that measure worker engagement and can be linked to business outcomes such as retention, productivity, profitability, customer engagement, and safety (Bates, 2004). These are the questions for workers:

- Do you know what is expected of you at work?
- Do you have the materials and equipment you need to do your work properly?
- Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
- In the past seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- Is there someone at work who encourages your development?
- Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
- Do your opinions seem to count?
- Does the mission/purpose of your company (organization) make you feel that your job is important?
- Are your fellow employees committed to doing quality work?
- Do you have a best friend at work?
- In the past six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
- In the past year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow? (p.51)

How would your employees answer these questions? The organization is responsible for building a meaningful workplace. It is up to the employees to contribute to making it an engaging workplace.

Okay, so you have had the dialogue with the marginal or mediocre employee. You've sat down with them and established new goals and objectives. You have provided additional training or added resources to help them achieve their goals. You have given them a timeline for improvement, and that time has now arrived. You have documented the results and the employee has still not improved. What do you do now?

There comes a time in an organization when the "weeds" must be plucked. If you don't do what needs to be done after you have given the employee a fair trial, you're not doing justice to the organization or the employee. It's time to let the employee go and to invest in another person. Sometimes it helps to have the individual do a spot-analysis of how they think they have performed. Sit down and really discuss it. This should not come as a surprise to them.

In some organizations, union agreements, state laws, and employment contracts may impact employee rights. You should understand clearly how those agreements, laws, and contracts apply to your employees. There is no easy way to fire an employee, so expect it to be difficult and prepare well. If you expect trouble from the employee, have another supervisor or HR person sit in the conference with you. Begin the conference by explaining what has been done to try to improve the employee's performance. Explain to the employee that you think termination is the best answer to the problem. Make the termination conference short. Do not go into detail about why the action is being taken—it will only invite argument. Above all, do not become angry even if the employee does.

Even fired employees have a few basic rights and probably will be eligible for some benefits. Explain those benefits to the employee, such as pay for unused vacation time or COBRA provisions that allow a former employee to pay his/her own health insurance premiums and remain in the insurance program for a period of time. Explain how and when the terminated employee will receive final pay.

It is best to have the employee leave the office immediately after the conference. Even if the employee has the right to a couple of weeks notice, it is still the best choice to pay the employee and ask the individual to leave work immediately. The productivity of an employee remaining on the job after being fired is very low and will probably negatively impact other employees. You also run the risk of some type of retaliation from a disgruntled employee.

After the conference, be sure to carefully document in writing what happened in the termination conference. It's very normal to feel bad after such a conference no matter how justified the termination. But if you worked hard to improve the employee, documented solid reasons why termination was the only option left, and handled the termination conference carefully, lighten up. You did the job you get paid to do, and the organization will be better for it.

The best time to figure out how to avoid putting yourself in the uncomfortable role of "terminator" again is right now while it's all fresh in your mind. Think through what happened. How could it have been avoided? What changes in hiring techniques or training procedures can you make that will better ensure that you hire a good employee? What could you do to improve the termination process? Write these ideas down and file them where they'll be handy for review before your next interview with new applicants.

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