Supporting staff to achieve their potential

10 ways to help your staff perform to the best of their ability

Introduction

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

This is the opinion of Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric. He was right: once you become a leader, your outlook on work must become less self-centric in order for you to succeed. You will no longer be judged solely on your output, but on the performance of those under your remit.

In addition to it being your job to support staff and help them achieve their potential, it is also a goal that any strong manager would be aiming for. If your staff are striving to better themselves, your team is going to put in a stronger performance, and generally be happier, more motivated and more innovative - not to mention more productive!

However, management can be a tricky business: you're dealing with a variety of individuals, all with their own goals, interests, motivations and personalities. There is no one-size-fits-all answer when it comes to managing a team, and managers must be flexible and adjust their management style depending on the situation.

That said, there are things some managers do that make them better at supporting staff and helping them achieve their potential. In this guide, we'll take a look at how managers should behave, and deal with common workplace situations, in order to become a supportive leader with a happy and productive team that is looking to the future.
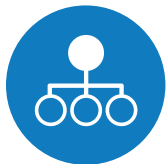
1. Use your authority

If used in Draconian way, wielding authority can have the opposite effect to what it is intended to achieve.

However, if managers throw their authority behind positive causes, such as expecting staff to achieve high standards, it can help a team to reach their potential. This is often referred to as the Pygmalion effect, or the power of expectations.

The Pygmalion effect looks at how every manager will have expectations of their staff, and these will be communicated, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the individual in question. The employee will then perform in line with the managerial expectations they have picked up - whether they know it or not - from their supervisor.

Managers are able to use this principle to elicit better performance from their teams by remembering that having - and communicating - high, yet achievable, expectations of individuals is likely to see improved output.

Most managers will have experienced staff members going through a 'complacent' phase, in which they are good at what they do and are comfortable with their role, but are not striving for more - instead, preferring to coast. By setting out your higher expectations to these employees, you will push them to achieve more, which is a win for them, you, and the team overall.

2. Communication

You will see 'communication' in pretty much every management article or book, and with good reason. The impact of clear communication cannot be underestimated when leading a team.

A failure to communicate effectively with a team can lead to a whole host of undesirable consequences, from a general lack of team efficiency and productiveness, to resentment and a lack of confidence in the manager's ability to lead the team. It is key, not only to the overall running of the team, but to the ability of team members to achieve their potential.

Communication should always be clear and concise, and presented in an honest and genuine way. If you're relaying important information from higher up, ensure you do it relatively quickly, and tell all of your team at the same time. A failure to do so can breed paranoia in the office environment, leaving employees concerned that secrets are being kept from them.

Even if you think there's nothing to say, it's a good idea to have regular one-on-one catch-ups and team meetings, because your team could be struggling or have concerns to raise that you're unaware of. Giving them a platform to speak is important as it will make them feel valued and let them know their contributions are important to you, and to the company overall.

A big part of the communication process for managers is active listening. Don't just speak at your team: make it more of a discussion by encouraging everyone to contribute, consulting on various pieces of news, and having a dedicated Q&A session at the end of each presentation or team meeting.
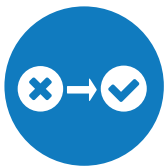
3. Turn failure into something positive

Those who are going to succeed cannot be afraid to fail. Risk-taking is imperative for the forward-movement of any company, and not all risks are going to pay off.

When they don't, as a manager it is essential not to play the blame game, but instead to look at what you and your team have learned from the experience, what you did right, and where you went wrong. Ensure that such 'failures' do not dissuade your team from stepping outside their comfort zone in the future by communicating clearly about what can be learnt from the situation, and perhaps even using it as a training strategy.

4. Praise effort

The number one failing of many managers is that they don't realise how much their team value their praise. Any achievements should be proportionally praised: it will boost morale and give the individual in question a confidence boost. It should also mean that they're more likely to make an effort in the future, and come closer to reaching their potential.

What's more, it's important not to just praise results, but to applaud people for the effort they put in. While good results are the end game for any team, sometimes a lot of effort will be put into a project that just doesn't turn out particularly well. It's important to acknowledge the effort people have put in, and the lengths they have gone to in any case.

These accolades shouldn't be restricted to one-on-one settings either. In order to reach their potential, employees will need you to give them a foot up on the career ladder by highlighting their achievements to senior management, and ensuring that the decision makers higher up in the company are aware of their potential. Not only will this make them feel proud and confident, and feel like there is a future for them at the company, it will also ensure you look secure in your job and sure enough of your own abilities that you're not threatened by other high-performers.

5. Lead by example

Leading by example applies to almost every aspect of management, from punctuality and dress code to office culture and how to behave at socials. And it's no different when it comes to team performance.

If your team sees you thinking about your future at the organisation, and striving towards bettering yourself and upskilling in a bid to progress, they're likely to do the same. No-one wants to be left behind, and if you're not resting on your laurels, neither will they.

6. Don't just improve on weaknesses, build on strengths

When it comes to self-improvement, many managers will look to how individual weaknesses on their team can be addressed.

While this is clearly important, it's also essential to look at employees' strengths, and to foster these talents. Individual staff members are likely to take pride in the things they are best at, and enjoy developing these skills with a view to becoming the best at them in the company.

Ensure you're asking people in their one-to-ones what they feel they're best at, and how they'd like to further develop these skills. Maybe there is training they'd like to be given time for, or a qualification that the company could contribute to? Applaud your team on their specific strengths, even when they surpass you in various skill areas.

7. Be open and accessible

One of the most important aspects of management is cultivating an open atmosphere on your team, between staff members and yourself, and striving to be an accessible leader.

This way, employees will not be afraid of coming to you with concerns and problems, meaning you can catch any red flags earlier and nip issues in the bud. It also means that they'll be more likely to approach you regarding their career plan, to see how you can support their progression, and perhaps look at you as a mentor.

However, if your employees feel that you don't have their best interests at heart, or will shoot down their ambitions, they're unlikely to open up to you in the same way, no matter how many one-on-ones or meetings you conduct with them.

8. Encourage ideas and creativity

Ideally, managers want to foster an atmosphere in their team where everyone feels like their ideas are valued, and that "there are no stupid ideas".

If this is achieved, creativity and innovation should flourish, and team members won't be afraid of bringing their ideas to the table.

9. Set out clear advancement opportunities and help your employees get there

No one is going to be able to advance in the workplace if there is no clear path of progression. Ensure your team is well aware of how they can progress within the organisation, and set out what they can do to climb to the next level.

However - it's not all about them! As a manager, you need to look out for opportunities within the company that would be a great fit for members of your team, whether this means speaking to colleagues to get them involved in various projects, or pushing certain work in their direction.

10. Make time for training, for your team and yourself

In order to progress, it is certain that staff members will need training in order to acquire the skills that will empower them to succeed. Ensure the training your team is offered is relevant and has practical application. Consulting your team to find out what types of training they think they need can be very helpful when developing learning plans.

It's also important not to forget to upskill yourself! As a manager, you need to constantly evolve in order to tackle increasingly difficult situations, and perhaps a rising number of employees in your charge. At Virtual College we offer online management and leadership courses, which are tailored for managers at essential, advanced and best practice levels. Use our toolkit to help your team, and yourself, climb to the next level of your management structure.

To find out more about Virtual College's online management and leadership training visit http://www.virtual-college.co.uk/vcproducts/people-manager.aspx.

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