Written by Dr. Brian A. Becker
Sunday, 01 July 2007 00:00

Dr. Brian A. Becker It is not unusual to hear sincere executives and managers lament that their major stumbling blocks to better performance are not technical in nature, but rather cultural—whatever that means. “How do we ‘get’ our team to the next performance level?” they ask. They then go on to recount the variety of change methods they have tried, including quality circles, teambuilding, values clarification, leadership training, 360° performance appraisal and elaborate visions. You name it; there is a stew of approaches. Just like Theory Z, surveys are conducted, curricula built and implemented and a ton of money spent.

Unfortunately, the “dark side” of continuous learning is that it can morph into something else, lose momentum and be replaced by the next holy grail of performance. At the end of the day, the best approaches may have driven some temporary value, but nothing seems to stick. What accounts for this?

Over the years I have conducted a Learning Exercise with supervisors, managers and executives to illustrate how people experience learning and performance. As the exercise unfolds, participants gain insight into how learning and mistakes, trial and error are the yin and yang of performance. They also discover that while many organizations espouse the theory that mistakes are “OK,” in the final analysis they really categorize mistakes as critical incidents on a performance appraisal or simply view them as a sign of a person’s ineffectiveness. When performance appraisals are tied to pay, rewards and promotion, participants indicate that they would have to be foolish if they didn’t put the best spin on their performance. “I have a mortgage to pay,” is how one respondent put it.

In the final phase of the Learning Exercise, participants come to recognize they have a strong desire to learn. However, fears of retribution, fears of letting others down or fears of failure, whether in substance or perception, contribute to a sense of losing control.

The need for control translates into a hidden performance bottleneck. Participants acknowledge that they subtly side-step difficult issues and focus on the more routine and controllable issues, thereby reducing emotional pain, conflict and the potential for higher performance. The end result is that sincere attempts to improve the status quo slowly are undermined and inadequate budgets, unrealistic timeframes, etc. are not challenged because, privately, people believe these issues are sources of conflict that should be avoided. Ultimately, the effort becomes the fad of the day and everyone sees the “other guy” as the problem.

It is not long, as the exercise winds down, that someone asks, “So how do we get out of this status quo loop?” The short answer is that rather than “get” anyone anywhere, change has to be based on a performance “invitation.” At its heart, an invitation gives the “invitee” the right to decline and balance control while minimizing the risks associated with learning. Employees operating in a culture of invitation openly choose to learn and detect and correct mistakes with ever-increasing rates of speed and precision.

“Invitation” is only one tool in a compact set of actionable ones, going beyond traditional applications and providing a performance platform that is definable, transferable, measurable, repeatable, sustainable and ethical.

Dr. Brian A. Becker is Manager of Organization Development and Human Resources, Siemens Energy Management and Automation

Joomla SEO powered by JoomSEF