Developing “SUPER MANAGERS”

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I remember my first supervisory position in 1976. I was promoted to the position of 2nd shift supervisor after working at the location for six months as an associate. A memo posted by the time clock announced my promotion but training was non-existent. I was aware of all the idiosyncrasies of my fellow associates and I was ready to punish them to boost productivity, because I thought all bosses ruled with an iron fist. Of course the opposite took place. The staff lined up at Human Resources to complain about my bully tactics and negative attitude. After personally apologizing to all thirty-two associates, I discovered that they were willing to forgive me because of my honesty and respect for them. Over the course of the next year I learned that maintaining a positive relationship with the associates through respect led to greater happiness and productivity.

In our previous article, “How to Enhance Associate Retention through Associate Training and Development Program” [ALM Journal, Summer 2013] we discussed two key initiatives that enhance employee retention: training and development programs, and associates’ relationships with their immediate manager. The topic of this article is the second initiative, the associate’s relationship with their immediate manager. This relationship is critical, and we cannot place enough emphasis on it. If the relationship between associates and their managers is a positive one, then your company is destined to be more productive, have a higher associate retention rate, and have higher customer satisfaction. If the relationship is poor, chances are your unit or your organization is in trouble.

In a recent study of 1,500 employees by Dale Carnegie and MSW Research, employee relationships with immediate managers ranked as the number one key driver in the impact of employee engagement. The attitude and actions of the immediate manager/supervisor can enhance employee engagement or can create an atmosphere where an employee becomes disengaged, (2012 Dale Carnegie and Associates). Disengaged employees lead to low productivity and ultimately higher turnover, which has cost U.S. businesses over $11 billion annually. In the book “First Break all the Rules” by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, the authors suggest that if an organization has a turnover issue, first look to the managers who are probably the culprits for high turnover.
These authors linked twelve key questions to four critical business outcomes: productivity, profitability, associate retention and customer satisfaction. Although we will not cover all twelve questions, a closer look reveals that five of these questions (see below) are directly related to the kind of relationship that associates and their managers lead.

If an employee answers “no” to any of these questions, it indicates that the employee/supervisor relationship is less than ideal. When associates’ relationships with their managers are poor, they dread going to work, avoid their managers if possible, and often are not willing to share information that could be helpful to overall company performance. Over time, associates are demotivated and disengaged, and will eventually quit.

Since the relationship between associates and their managers is so important, we should start thinking about how to develop “super managers” who are positive and will create high-quality relationships with their associates. First and foremost, we need to establish the correct hiring process that measures critical personalities, which produce our “super managers.” Organizations often hire frontline managers based on their task performance, i.e. the most productive associate. However, using such hiring methods is like picking supervisors based on the flip of a coin, counting on luck to provide positive outcomes. Although it is important for managers to know the jobs they are supervising, it is much more critical that they possess the personality traits that can make them successful as a manager. Tasks such as loading a washer, folding sheets, or measuring the correct chemicals can be taught and therefore learned and mastered over time. On the other hand, personality traits that are intrinsic to a super manager and enable positive relationships with their associates are much harder to change, teach, or learn, because they are largely innate. These personality traits include high levels of empathy, compassion, and gratitude. Managers who have these particular traits are more successful at engaging associates and providing positive feedback, because they care about the needs of their associates, are compassionate towards associates when they are experiencing difficulties, and are grateful that their associates are putting in effort everyday.

Once an employee with the ideal inherent personality traits for leadership is identified, he or she will need help become a “super manager.” This is done through training in the art of positive leadership. Of the many elements of positive leadership, one of the most critical is the concept of supportive communication. Recent studies have shown that supportive communication increases productivity and enhances associates’ loyalty to the manager and to the organization. Supportive communication includes praising employees for their job performance, providing encouragement for their work efforts, expressing concerns about their job satisfaction, providing support for associates’ professional development, demonstrating concern for their feelings, actively listening to their opinions, and expressing empathy and sensitivity to their needs. (Krackhardt, McKenna, Porter, and Steers, 1981).

Another key aspect of supportive communication is critical conversation, that is, when you have to provide negative feedback to their associates. Managers need to be trained on the proper process for the delivery of critical conversation.

**Key Questions to business outcomes**

Do I know what is expected of me at work?

Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?

Do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?

Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?

At work, do my opinions seem to count?
They need to be able to correct negative behaviors without destroying the relationship that they have established with their associates. This communication is completed through private conversation that deals directly with the incorrect behavior objectively, focusing on the behaviors that need to be modified and why it should be modified. Supportive conversation focuses on the actions of the associates and not on the associates themselves.

Hiring and training managers is a vital part for any organization because it shows a commitment to the associates, which creates a loyalty to the company and establishes an esprit de corps. Training is especially important for associates who are promoted from within the organization. Experience has shown that removing that new manager from the staff they will be supervising during the training is especially helpful. Training them on another shift at an offsite location helps them focus on the learning process and provides them with confidence when they return to supervise their associates.

“Super managers” are not hard to find or groom from within the ranks of employees. Remember, behaviors can be taught, but personalities are inherent. Focus on the key personalities traits of super managers: empathy, compassion, and gratitude. Provide proper managerial training specifically targeted for supportive communication, including the use of critical conversations. A positive, high quality relationship between managers and their associates creates higher levels of associate engagement, productivity, customer satisfaction, and retention.

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**Resources for Further Learning**


McHugh, M. D., & Ma, C. (2013). Hospital nursing and 30-day readmissions among medicare patients with heart failure, acute myocardial infarction, and pneumonia. Medical Care, 51, 52-59. This study, conducted in a hospital setting, shows that hospitals with a positive work environment were associated with lower readmission rates. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23151591

www.positiveleader.com (Positive Leader, LLC). Positive Leader, LLC is a management consulting company that helps corporate leaders and executives achieve superior performance through creating a positive work environment.

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**Developing “Super Managers”**

Earn one *general education* credit hour by completing the quiz over the material from this educational offering. To maintain ALM credentials individuals must submit proof of continuing education in laundry & linen specific programs every three years. Access to contact hour quizzes are a benefit of membership in ALM Check your current continuing education status here.
I’m pleased to introduce you to ALM’s newest association professional, Emily Glass. Emily took over the reins of Membership Services Manager the first of September and is rapidly learning the nuances of the textile care services industry. A highly successful membership and event manager, she returns to her home state of Kentucky from Atlanta, Georgia where she worked with two state-wide associations.

A journalism graduate from the University of Kentucky, Emily also holds a certificate in Conference and Meeting Management. “Her success record with member retention and new member recruitment were a key factor in our decision to bring her on-board” says ALM Executive Director, Linda Fairbanks. Emily is inquisitive, always seeking a better solution and dedicated to serving the customer’s needs; this combination makes her an excellent value to the organization and will drive us all to higher performance.

“I am excited to join the ALM family. ALM has a bright future with such a strong and devoted team to ensure its success. I look forward to growing our membership base, enlisting new member benefits and programs, and serving our members in all capacities that holds true to the ALM brand and standard. If I can be of any service to you, please let me know. I look forward to meeting you all soon”!

I encourage all members to extend a welcome and reach out to Emily for your membership services needs. Eglass@almnet.org